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The
DARK DAWN

By MARTHA OSTENSO

Author of "WILD GEESE"

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PART ONE

HATTIE MURKER

CHAPTER I

The real story of Lucian Dorrit is not that of his boyish worship and sorrow for the mighty and ineffectual William Dorrit, his father, nor is it that of the passion and tragedy and beauty of his mature life. It has to do rather with two weeks in the autumn of his twenty-first year when he traveled on foot through the sprawling prairie towns and past the rich new farms of that very new northern land which the great William Dorrit had chosen for his own. Indian summer had begun early that year and had lain like a phantasy of gold upon the earth. The warmth and beauty and light of things entered the youth's soul there, so that there were moments of rapture almost insupportable. Of all the illusory phenomena of earth there is none so treacherous as Indian summer!

It was a mere boy's whim that had sent Lucian Dorrit afoot through those prairies in the golden autumn. There was money in his pockets. There was a railroad all the way from Gary, where he had taken the road, to Loyola, whither he was bound. Besides, he was eager enough to be home again with his father and his mother, his two younger brothers, and his little sister, Leona. Great things had happened to him since he had left home six weeks ago to become a harvester in the fields of strangers. There would be stories to tell, scores of them, and endless eager questionings that would last for days and days.

Ah, those rollicking brothers of his! Little they knew of what six weeks in the harvest fields could do for a man. Nor could they guess what thumpings were in store for them!

Something else, however, had taken hold of Lucian Dorrit's heart, a kind of mighty hunger for things invisible that somehow softened his yearning to be back home again. Try as he might, he could not have named it. Once upon the open road, he knew that he was feeding it. He knew there was joy in placing his feet upon the dusty, whitish way that spilled itself into countless eccentric deviations where his eyes followed it, onward and beyond, to the very rim of the earth. He even delighted in the ragged fence that ran beside it, gray and broken from the extremes of weather in those exposed, shallow valleys. His senses quickened to the low hum that hung about him in the golden day. It is curious, that warm hum in the air of Indian summer, after all insect life is stilled. No bird makes it, and no tree; and the wind makes a lapsing sound distinct from it. It is as though the tiny, fervid souls of dead grass-creatures are still hovering in that blue false air reproachful for having been cheated of this last moment of delight.

Here and there the bright, dry leaves of a sumac bush lay dabbled in the pale dust of the road. Nettle, rust-colored and ineffectual now, stood in the ditches tangled with the blackened, limp leaves of the pigweed. Wild morning-glories that had traced their loveliness about the old fence clung like dry, colorless scum, like strings of spittle, on the posts. Rarely, a bird flitted from the

underbrush with subdued song and soared, unreal, into the irreality of the sky. Life has no authority in this charmed region of Indian summer. Nothing has authority here except inanimate earth and heaven.

Lucian Dorrit walked in the pleasant haze, scarcely conscious of his own being. Half-bodied visions drifted, vague and pleasurable, through his mind, but left no lasting thought. He was drugged, spirited away on the mellifluent air of that Indian summer to a place in which, it seemed, he had wandered long ago, and to a time that was like a faintly echoing song or like a golden mist seen through the dark glass of memory. . . .

It was thus the great William Dorrit himself might have walked along some forgotten road of his younger years!

Even in those days and in that country where dress was not seriously reckoned with, Lucian Dorrit, swinging along the prairie road, was an extraordinarily assorted figure. His trousers, bought for him two years ago, had failed utterly to keep pace with the demands of the passing months. It was not enough that they had shrunken until the boy's ankles had been left quite exposed. The shrinking had continued relentlessly upward until the trousers had relinquished all hope of giving their wearer even rudimentary comfort. His heavy white socks, knitted by his mother, sagged below the tops of his shoes and pouched about his ankles. The vest he wore had belonged to his father, was of greenish black broadcloth, and billowed emptily across Lucian's stomach. His coat was a perfect temperamental mate to his trousers, and to secure a little comfort Lucian had been obliged to leave it unbuttoned.

The pockets were nearer to his elbows than to his hands and he had laughed heartily at his own expense when it had occurred to him that reaching for anything in one of those pockets was not unlike a dog's leg scratching for an unattainable flea. He had donned a white shirt with a soft collar which he had left unbuttoned at the throat. His hat was a soft felt of nondescript gray, much battered about the crown, its well-worn brim slouching limply about his ears. On his square shoulders he bore the lumpy pack that held his rougher work clothes, a black overcoat, and the half-dozen necessaries of his toilet.

But what are clothes to a man when he is alone on the sunlit stretches of a country road! The days had attained that borrowed warmth of late October, a warmth that seems to come from the final giving up into the air of some of the fire of the oak leaves, and some of the last burning light of the blue meadows. The mornings were domed by a sky as blue as the bluest gentian that ever grew. The noons were mellow and soft, obscuring the landscape in a smoky, sensuous gossamer. The nights were starlit and eerie with the glow of distant ghost-fires dancing where the straw-piles burned yellow against the horizon.

Under the dream of those days on the northern prairies Lucian Dorrit felt himself growing, felt desires and comprehensions and beauties that had never before defined themselves clearly within him. In that twilight of the sensibilities during which the soul of the boy passes and the soul of the man is informed, Lucian's life flamed suddenly with new purpose. It was as if he had all at once become extraordinary among men. Beyond the inhospitable con-

fines of the little world in which he had always lived lay another world, a greater world, where the precious thing that was within him would take its destined form. What that form would be at last he did not know. He only knew that he would force life to yield him what it had never yielded to the great and ineffectual man who was his father. He knew he would go down into the cities of the world, his heart singing the mighty rhythm of the vast country in which he had been bred. He would shape the saga of that savage, tender, shining land, and the sorrows and humors of its people.

Now and then, as he swung along the road, a town would rise like an island on that sea of prairie, its grain elevators struck straight and bare and red against the smooth blue of the sky. They were bold, harsh little towns, these, strung like new and gaudy beads along the railway with its shining steel. Midway between two such towns the road led Lucian to a railway siding where a freight train with wheat from North Dakota barred the way while the engine took on water. Lucian's feet were smarting from the unnatural heat of the hard road he had been following since mid-forenoon. He seated himself on a pile of ties where the road crossed the track, rather glad for an excuse to wait for the train to move away. He swung his pack down from his shoulders and bared his head to the faint breeze that had sprung up earlier in the day.

As it happened he had not long to wait. He had been sitting on the pile of ties for less than five minutes when there came a rumble of shunting cars and a resolute coughing from the laboring engine. As the whole train

started to move slowly along the track, the thought came to Lucian that he might easily clamber up between two of the cars and ride as far as the next town. Somewhere in the direction toward which the train was moving was the little town of Lost River, where his father's sister lived on the meager profits of a boarding-house. It was almost a year now since he had seen his hard-working aunt. He would like to surprise her.

He had all but made up his mind when the caboose came rattling by, its green flags flapping, a couple of begrimed trainmen standing on the rear platform and cackling profanely as the train gathered speed. Lucian was at a loss to understand their derisive laughter and their suggestive gestures until he discovered, standing less than ten yards from him on the opposite side of the railway, quite the most dilapidated human being he had ever seen at close range. The man himself, however, appeared in no way concerned over his condition. He was waving a broken derby and laughing heartily with his eyes upon the departing train.

All at once he became aware of Lucian seated on the pile of ties. He greeted him with a smile that made Lucian chuckle in spite of himself.

"The joke's on us, stranger!" the tramp called across the tracks, and shook his shaggy head as he laughed once more.

"What joke?" Lucian asked.

"Isn't it a joke to be kicked off in the middle of nowhere just when you think you've got your passage booked through to the Windy City?"

Lucian understood. "That lets me out, friend," he replied. "They got away before I had a chance to climb up."

"Which way are you heading?"

"Going down to Nenuphar."

"Nenuphar?"

"Next town," Lucian told him. "From there—to Lost River—and Loyola."

"All one to me," the tramp declared.

And together the two set off along the open road. For a half-mile or so neither spoke more than a casual word. The tramp seemed busy with his own thoughts. Lucian stole furtive glances at the man's face. It was a face neither old nor young, but set into lines of perpetual smiling. It was not long, however, before Lucian's strange companion roused himself with a shake of his shaggy head and began to talk in a voice so mellow that its charm was irresistible.

"What a world this would be, my friend, if men were reasonable," he observed, "if they were content to think instead of getting sentimental and rushing into action before they know what they are doing. All life might be like this, if we were reasonable—walking along a quiet road on a sunny afternoon."

Lucian smiled. "And who would do things?" he asked.

"Do things, my friend? There is too much doing—too little being! When we begin to get strenuous, life begins to grow intolerable. You must have thought of that. Living is tolerable and even amusing if you look at it with a clear eye. Yonder it goes," he said, his eyes lifted to

where a cloud of black smoke smeared the horizon behind which the train had passed from sight, "yonder it goes—this mad life we lead—a lot of black smoke and a lot of clatter and a shriek or two of a whistle. Half an hour from now even the smoke will be gone."

With something of a shock it came to Lucian then that the tramp's words fitted all too readily into the design his own thinking had taken during his days spent along the road. This intellectual tramp accepted without question the negation of life which was just beginning, with stealthy, agonizing tread, to haunt the most remote chambers of Lucian's mind. Almost fearfully, with a profound sense of disloyalty to his own soul, he listened while his companion went on.

"What complicates it for us is that people look at life with a lot of fuzz on their eyeballs—fuzz like laws and dogma and honor that has nothing whatever to do with honor. Now and then a man is born who dares to think he can take the world as it is and make it half-way decent for a human soul to exist in it. That's what the idealist always thinks. The trouble with him is that he becomes strenuous, too, and starts bringing things to pass. Then one day he wakes up. Just when he's settled down to a nice long ride in the half comfort he has agreed to accept as a compromise, someone finds him and kicks him out and he's got to hoof it the rest of the way by himself. Then they go by and give you the laugh. And why not? The joke is on you, isn't it!"

His voice was booming now, his words coming in great

resonant bursts of sound that carried some magnetic power quite new to Lucian.

"Look at me, my friend! I'm a tramp, an outcast. But there are times when I am convinced that I do the world a favor to go on living in it. I am one of the few really rational persons in it. I am one of the very few who give it any dignity at all. The world can't laugh at me now, because I've got my laugh in first. It can't laugh at me, because I don't exist. I'm not even a name in somebody's Bible."

The afternoon wore along, Lucian listening to his strange companion booming away like some actor in a highly emotional rôle. Then, as they came to a little village beside the railway, the tramp took his leave as abruptly as he had entered Lucian's world a few hours before.

"So long, my friend," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm going to wait here for the next through freight. It's more pleasant to walk, but it's also more tiring and I've lost the swing of it somehow. Good luck!"

"I'd go with you," Lucian said, "but I've never got used to riding a bumper."

"My friend," the tramp responded, "who doesn't ride a bumper, eh?"

His bellowing laugh broke forth as he seized Lucian's hand and shook it warmly. Lucian's eyes fell to the hand that grasped his. On one of the fingers a plain, broad silver ring glinted in the light of the late afternoon. Lucian would have asked him about that silver band had

shyness not restrained him. Suddenly the man turned and was gone across the network of tracks, his shabby figure haloed about by the ruddy glow of the late sun. Watching him go, Lucian experienced an exhilaration that was altogether new, and a deep regret that he was not to meet him again. Nor did that regret vanish wholly when he later rebuked himself for having spent the afternoon in the company of a brazen heretic.

Strange things befell Luce Dorrit in the town of Nenuphar.

He came to the town early in the afternoon of the following day, which was Saturday, the gray dust of many miles of road filling the cracks of his shoes and making dark stripes of the knitted grooves in his socks.

Even from afar he had been aware of a certain stir about the place that was altogether unusual in those prairie towns. At the limits of the town he found a fall fair in full progress. Here a high wire fence enclosed a few acres of land, and below an archway on which was printed in large letters, "Fair Grounds," there was a turnstile and a small booth. Outside the grounds stood the visitors' vehicles, the horses hitched so that they were able to nibble at the long, drying grass of the open field. Within the enclosure, directly before the main entrance, ran a wide avenue of tents and booths and hastily erected platforms, and beyond, a group of sheds and low-roofed buildings of a more durable kind.

The avenue presented a gay picture with its moving crowds, its fluttering flags, its many colored banners, its jigging balloons, its bunting-covered platforms on which

strangely exotic figures cavorted comically to attract the eyes of loiterers. Here and there across the passageways golden cobs of corn were strung in long festoons and sheaves of ripened wheat were woven into garlands. Under the shrill cacophony of whistles and horns sounded the pleasant tintinnabulation of the pop-corn vender's bell.

When he had stood for some time before the main entrance, taking in the colorful picture from a distance, Lucian paid the small price of admission and went in. For a half-hour or so he sauntered up one aisle of stalls and down another, and squandered a little silver here and there in attempts to toss wooden rings about the gaudy prizes displayed in the concessions, shooting the miniature ducks that traveled on their wire at the end of a long gallery—missing the flickering taper's flame—ringing the bell in the swinging target. More than one pair of eyes followed him as he made his large way, with the slight and unconscious swagger of his broad shoulders, through the crowd. Nor was it unnatural if here and there a ruddy-cheeked country girl should nudge her companion, her eyes grown suddenly very round and bright as the stranger passed.

Lucian had been wandering for nearly an hour when he came to a tent before which a small crowd of men and boys had gathered. Above the entrance to the tent a canvas streamer, painted in flaming colors, bore the legend: "Jake La Rue, Wrestling Champion of Ten Counties." At one side of the entrance a large placard bearing the champion's photograph announced that the doughty Mr. La Rue was prepared to forfeit the sum of fifty dollars

to any man he could not toss fairly within three minutes. Neither weight nor age was any barrier, it seemed, the fastidious champion reserving the right, however, to draw the color line.

Lucian elbowed his way through the crowd to where the ticket seller stood on a box that had been draped with red bunting.

"Can anybody try for that?" he asked the man and pointed to the placard.

"Anybody that's free, white, and twenty-one!" he was told.

Lucian grinned mildly, bought a ticket, and passed into the tent. Within, he ran his eyes quickly over the crowd that had already entered. There were farmers and country boys there with weathered faces and clear eyes that somehow placed Lucian at his ease in spite of the loafers and nondescripts who made up the greater part of the group. There were no seats in the place, the spectators standing about a small arena that had been roped off in the middle of the enclosure. Within the roped square, dressed in trunks of brilliant purple, stood the redoubtable champion, turning pompously about and about on the balls of his feet, his eyes half closed, his shaggy chest expanded, his arms flexed and tensed so as to make the biceps stand out.

Lucian, standing a head above the men in the crowd, looked once closely at the man and smiled to himself. Nor did his smile fade when the champion's wrestling partner stepped through the ropes and came to friendly grips with the waiting hero. To Lucian's mind, at least,

there was no doubt that the exhibition had been carefully rehearsed many times, nor could he escape a feeling of embarrassment at the ease with which the partner's shoulders were pinned, neatly and with little loss of time, to the sawdust-sprinkled ground.

The second encounter had been even more carefully rehearsed. For fully a minute the contest progressed at a furious pace, at the end of which time the partner had evidently succeeded in gaining a decided advantage over the champion. In a moment more, it seemed inevitable, Jake La Rue's shoulders would be in the sawdust. The crowd became mildly excited at the prospect of the champion's being thrown. The exhibition had been planned, however, with quite another end in view. When the excitement was at its highest the champion made a lightning movement, the partner's feet left the ground suddenly, and his shoulders descended with a thud on the exact spot where his feet had stood a fraction of a second before.

In the dead silence that followed, Lucian's laugh broke forth boisterously and the eyes of the crowd turned to him as he pressed forward and leaned across the taut rope at the edge of the square.

"Maybe you could teach me to do that," he said, smiling into the champion's face.

The wrestler strode from his place and stood before his challenger. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Luce Dorrit, a farmer from down Loyola way," Luce informed him. "And I know a man who could break your back for you if he was here to do it!"

The champion grinned. "I've been looking for a man just like that," he replied. "What's his name?"

"Big William Dorrit—my father!" Lucian told him.

The announcement seemed to amuse the wrestler. He laughed aloud and looked about him at the faces of the men who stood close to the square.

"Why don't you send for him?" he asked Lucian.

"He's got work to do," Lucian replied, "but I'm old enough—and free enough—and if I'm white enough, I'd like to tackle it myself!"

The taunt went home. The wrestler scowled angrily.

"Don't waste time talkin' about it out there!" he growled.

"I won't," Lucian replied as he handed his pack to a farmer standing beside him and began at once to remove his coat and vest. When he had rolled up his sleeves he hitched his belt in about his waist and vaulted over the rope.

The story of that bout never ceased to be a favorite among the townsmen of Nenuphar. For months, it seemed, they preferred to talk about nothing else. They would tell of how the young farmer from down Loyola way stepped into the square with Jake La Rue, strode boldly up and seized the champion about the waist, crushed his resistance with one mighty heave of his arms and shoulders, lifted him as a man might lift a bag of wheat, turned him over and dropped him on his flat head as if he were chucking a fence post into a hole. Above all, they loved to tell how Lucian Dorrit left the cham-

pion's tent then without waiting to claim the fifty dollars that was his due and how the champion was heard of no more around Nenuphar after that day.

To Lucian, however, the event was of no more than passing importance. His only thought, when he had left the tent, was to shake himself free of the men and boys who followed him to the very end of the midway and might have gone with him out of the grounds had they been able to return without forfeiting an additional admission fee.

When he was alone again, Lucian made his way along a straggling roadway that led to the end of a street at the edge of the town. A few minutes later he halted before a low building with a large window on which the words, "Quick Hot Lunch" had been painstakingly painted in a brilliant yellow. Through the window he could see the row of upright stools that ran down the length of the high counter. The place was deserted save for a girl dressed in white who had just entered through a door at the back, a pile of clean white dishes in her arms. Opening the door, Lucian went in and seated himself on one of the stools.

The next moment he seemed to have forgotten just why he had come in. He was frankly staring across the counter into the sweetest, most sympathetic face he had ever seen. As she returned his gaze, an altogether unaccountable warmth swept over him. He had never known that eyes could be so liquid blue or lashes so unbelievably long and dark.

Lucian gulped. "Coffee and a ham sandwich—please," he said finally and the girl disappeared suddenly through the door that led to the kitchen at the back.

She was out again before Lucian had time to swallow the lump of excitement that had risen in his throat. In a mood of desperation he plunged into the only subject he could bring clearly to mind.

"Say," he began, turning his cup around nervously so that the coffee slopped over into his saucer, "do you know a fellow up at the fair grounds by the name of Jake La Rue? He's a—a wrestler."

The girl made a grimace. "Yes—he's been in here," she informed him. "Are you lookin' for him?"

Lucian laughed aloud and felt more like himself.

"Looking for him? I turned him on his head up there at the grounds just now," he told her.

"Yes?" she observed doubtfully.

"Before the whole crowd," Lucian said in a manner so ingenuous that the girl's doubts were dissipated at once.

She looked him over appraisingly. "You look awful strong," she ventured, her dark lashes fluttering as she ran her eyes quickly over his broad shoulders.

The blood tingled in Lucian's cheeks.

"Do you work here all the time?" he asked her.

"I'm on days—till the fair is over," she told him. "I get off at supper-time."

Even had he sought it Lucian could have found no graceful means of retreat. The inevitable question trembled on his lips. Never before had he been so flagrantly bold.

"I don't know anybody in town." He cleared his throat huskily. "Maybe you'd go for a walk with me to-night?"

He had put the matter bluntly and in the only words he could think of just then.

"For a stranger," she said, with another flutter of her dark lashes, "you don't lose much time."

"I haven't much time to lose," he retorted. "I'm going away again in the morning."

She smiled at him. "Better let me give you another cup of coffee," she suggested. "You've let it get cold."

In the early evening she met him at the door with her hat and coat on, her manner showing no more embarrassment than if their meeting had been a nightly occurrence for weeks. Down the wide street they walked until they came to where the lumberyard lay near the outskirts of the town. It was quiet there with the sweet, penetrating smell of pine and spruce in the cool air. There they took the railway track where it stretched westward over the long miles of unrelieved prairie. Before them the sun was going down in an immense ball of flame just where the two gleaming ribbons of steel faded at the horizon's edge. The sun cast no rays, scarcely colored the sky around it, simply hung there on the earth's rim like the burning heart of creation.

Lucian was profoundly moved by the sight.

"Did you ever see anything like that!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

"Yes," she replied, blinking into the light, "we always have pretty sunsets here."

Pretty! Some hint of misgiving entered Lucian's soul. Were there people in the world incapable of wonder?

"But the sun doesn't often roll right off the track into space like that—does it?" he asked her.

She looked up at him doubtfully, but did not reply.

They walked then for a mile or so in almost complete silence. A certain rapture bore Lucian along, a certain unrelated exultation.

Suddenly he broke forth again. "Just think of the first pioneer who saw the sun going down here after his first day on this land! Can you picture that? No trees, no mountains, no lakes! Just land! Can't you sometimes just feel yourself being whirled through space when you look out over these prairies? Can't you?"

She looked up at him again, mildly curious, mildly uneasy. Lucian could not understand that look. Why did she not say something? He wanted to tell her how he felt there before all the glory of radiant sky and endless prairie, how it made a man yearn for the unattainable in life, how it set him upon the heights above the kingdoms of the world and made him dream unheard-of things.

"I've been on my feet all day," she told him presently. "Let's go down here and rest for a while."

They had come to a small trestle with an abutment at either end. Lucian, saying nothing, helped her down, then got down beside her. The girl curled up in a corner made by two upright timbers. Luce sat with his long legs dangling over the edge of a square beam. He stared for a while into the purple, fuliginous water of the slough that lay under the bridge, then looked up suddenly at his

companion. He found her gazing at him curiously. Her tender, pale face appealed to him as being very lovely in the soft light. He leaned toward her slightly, remembering that she was probably very tired after her day's work. She moved toward him with a sigh and rested her head against his shoulder. For some time they sat thus without speaking. Presently Lucian felt an arm move up about his shoulders and, a moment later, cool fingers slip under his collar. He turned to her gravely and kissed her.

A vague uneasiness swept Lucian suddenly, a sense of having done an unworthy, an impious thing. Irrelevantly enough, he recalled words which the great William Dorrit, a man of few precepts, had pronounced with characteristic hesitancy on the day that Lucian had left Loyola for the harvest fields of the north. "Shun the very appearance of evil!" he had said, and Lucian had felt the words burn themselves into his memory.

He got to his feet abruptly. "I think we'd better go back now," he said quietly. "You'll be getting cold sitting here."

He gave her his hand and pulled her to her feet. For a moment she stood close to him, her fingers clasping his hands impulsively, her blue eyes smoldering under their long lashes. When he did not move, she turned from him suddenly and climbed back to the track without his help.

As they walked back to town, the two or three attempts at conversation which Lucian made fell hopelessly flat. The girl's replies were short and almost disdainful. It had become dark when they finally halted before the house where the girl lived. Lucian lingered a moment at the

gate, searching his mind for some word of apology to make before he left her.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," he told her awkwardly. "Didn't you want me to kiss you?"

The girl tossed her head. "You're just a fool!" she flung at him over her shoulder as she hurried up the narrow pathway that led to the door.

She did not look back, although Lucian lingered for some time hoping that she might turn and speak before she reached the door. He saw her go into the house, heard her close the door behind her. Presently he saw a light go on in an upper window and a shade hurriedly drawn. Behind it a shadow moved, grew large, grotesque, sprawled and grew small and slender again. A dull warmth stole over Lucian, closed suffocatingly about his heart. He turned and almost ran down the street. The gas-lights in the streets of Nenuphar blinked at him with sickly knowledge as he darted past them. And before the end of another half-hour he was swinging along the dusty road in the darkness, his mind upon Lost River, where lived the sister of William Dorrit.

Three days later he strode down the main street of the town and halted before a house that had been set well back and was almost surrounded by yellowing box alder trees. A tide of yellow leaves had ebbed up against the picket fence along the wooden walk. The lawn in front of the house was closely cropped and was still a lively green, with here and there a yellow leaf settling gently down upon it out of the sunlight. Closer to the house great, dusky-hearted dahlias grew, asters, marigold and

all the sturdy flowers of the waning year, with ribbon grass, severe and orderly, growing in between. Lucian felt a kindling of warmth within him as he swung open the gate and let his eyes rove over the house.

Aunt Ella Blake herself opened the door to him.

"It's you, Luce!" she cried, throwing her plump arms heartily about his shoulders. "Well, well! Who'd have thought to see you! Come on into the kitchen. Can't leave my cookin' for even a minute. Throw your bundle behind the door. There! Now come with me. You can wash your hands at the sink. My, my, but it's good to see you!"

Lucian followed her solid, square figure with the large bow of her apron flapping generously across her broad back. The kitchen into which he stepped smelled temptingly of roasting beef and a sizzling noise from the oven was sweet to hear. Aunt Ella set a wash basin for him, whipped a clean towel from a drawer, and then bustled about her work as she continued to talk, hurling one question after another at Lucian while he did his best to answer them, at the same time scrubbing vigorously to remove some of the dust he had picked up along the miles of prairie road.

"And where all have you been since you left home? It must have been an experience for you, I must say. Did they work you hard and did they pay you well—or have you spent all you made and have to walk home and wear out good shoe-leather on the way? Dave'll not be in till supper time, but he'll be glad to see you. And my, but how you've grown! You'll be as big as William yet if

you keep it up. And have you had any word from home lately? But you do the talkin' or they'll be in for supper before I'm more'n half ready for them."

For nearly an hour Lucian talked to her of his experiences in the wheat fields of Dakota and of what had befallen him along the way since he had left the town of Gary. Then he sat apart or wandered about the house while Aunt Ella served supper to her hungry boarders. Uncle Dave did not come in until the regular supper hour was past. With his return, Lucian was given a glimpse of the irony that controls all life. The dapper little husband of Aunt Ella was all excitement over news that had come to town that afternoon and had set the place agog.

It appeared that a tramp had been burned to death in a box car on a siding about ten miles east of Lost River. The charred body had been found among the smoking ruins of the car early that day and had been brought up to Lost River in the hope that it might be identified. Clues to the man's identity were wanting, however, save for a broad silver ring that had been found on one of the fingers of the right hand. A sick tremor shook Lucian as he heard his uncle discuss the tragedy. It was some minutes before he could bring himself to tell them of his meeting with the tramp and of their talk along the way.

In the excitement of the moment Uncle Dave had all but forgotten to tell Lucian that he had that afternoon received a brief letter from Loyola informing him that William Dorrit had fallen suddenly ill and was confined to his bed. All at once it was as if a great light had gone out in Lucian's world. It had never come to him before

that anything could happen to the great William Dorrit.

"I'll have to take the train out of here in the morning," he said as the three of them sat down to their late supper.

Aunt Ella was no optimist. In times of trouble she had recourse to a kind of sentimental fatalism through which the future became very dark indeed.

"I might have known it," she said in a shaking voice. "I've been lookin' for it this five years back. It's a wonder to me he didn't break years ago, that's all."

"Ella!" Uncle Dave remonstrated mildly.

"What's the use of talkin', Dave Blake!" she retorted, her voice rising as she spoke. "You know as well as I do that William Dorrit was cheated out of life itself the day he married Agatha Sherwood. What's more, Luce Dorrit knows it, too, even if she *is* his mother. William Dorrit was meant for something in the world and he'd 'a' been something, too, if he hadn't gone and married a woman who had him scared to death from the day she got him."

Little pin-points of moisture came out on Lucian's brow as he listened to his aunt. He had heard her express herself before concerning his mother, but never quite so bitterly. His aunt's resentment, in fact, had always been something of a problem to Lucian. He had thought it might be because the Blakes had lived childless for the thirty-odd years of their married life while Agatha Dorrit had been blessed with three healthy boys and a girl. And yet, there were times when Lucian himself had almost admitted the reasonableness of Ella Blake's hatred of the woman William Dorrit had married. He had seen his father actually cower before the fierce anger that seemed

absolutely to control his mother at times, had seen him come to utter confusion in his work as if his mind had suddenly lost its grip of things, had seen him walk bewildered out of the house to spend the day in aimless wandering about the fields. He had wept for his father at such times and had railed secretly against his unfeeling mother.

A vague sense of family loyalty, however, moved him to speak in defense of his mother now.

"Ma has done a lot for us, Aunt Ella," he said quietly, not venturing to raise his eyes from his plate.

"Yes, Luce Dorrit—she has! She has worked hard for you. I know that. Though she hasn't worked any harder than any decent mother would work for her children. And I'll say this for her—and I've always said it—Agatha Dorrit never let a child of hers go for the want of washin' and a clean stitch to put on them when they needed it. I'll say that for her. But she's made cowards of you, just the same, Luce Dorrit. She's done with you as she's done with brother William. She's goin' to do it more with you than with the others because you're more like William than any of the others, unless Leona. If you weren't your father all over again I wouldn't worry about you. But you're goin' like him, sure as light. And it's Agatha Dorrit that's doin' it. You're a man now, full grown you might say, but I'll bet you don't dare to call your soul your own this minute. I guess *I* know. I've watched brother William breakin' under her for the last twenty years and more."

"I think, Ella," Uncle Dave protested mildly once more,

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"I think I'd like to hear Luce tell about his trip up north."

Aunt Ella offered no word in reply. In fact, she had reached the point she invariably reached after giving rein to her opinions, at which her feelings could no longer find expression in mere words. She wept silently, brushing away her tears with the back of her work-hardened hand, while Lucian and his Uncle Dave talked of harvest fields and wages and of whole farms that had yielded forty bushels of good wheat to the acre.

After a troubled night with very little sleep, Lucian rose early to catch the train for Loyola. When he left his aunt's house he took with him a substantial luncheon which her busy hands had prepared for him in spite of her multitudinous duties. After all, she loved William Dorrit's son as though he had been her own. She stood in the doorway and watched him go through the gate and down the street. When she could see him no more, she blew her nose energetically and said aloud to herself, "Just like William—with that loose-legged, easy walk of his. And some darn woman'll get him, too—same as one got William!"

It was mid-forenoon when Lucian reached the town of Loyola. If a railway siding, a station-house, a pool room, a general store and a post-office, brought together in humble company with a church, a school and an "opera-house" can be called a town, then to Loyola belonged the title with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. There was Melham's general store with its hot-air register in the floor where Lucian had often warmed his feet on the way home from school in the bitter winter

days of his boyhood. There was Castle's Livery Stable, subsequently become a country garage, whose wizened, mottled-faced owner spent his Saturday nights in poker games with country lads who met in the room at the back of the pool hall. There was the public school where the rather ineffectual Mr. Tingley bore with patience the unconscious affronts to his dignity and received visitors with a smile. There was the Presbyterian church where weekly meetings of the Christian Endeavor were attended by shy young lovers who held hands furtively during a prayer and became boisterous at sociables. There was the pool room where the town youth smoked cigarettes and listened to the lurid stories that traveling salesmen told. There was also a doctor's office, to be sure, and an old Doctor Muller whose chief occupation during the day seemed to be solitaire and whose chief delight at night was said to be the bottle, but whose healing hand and shrewd mind had made him nevertheless a kind of god among his people.

Lucian did not want to see the town that day. He had but one thought and that was to set his feet in the familiar way that led north out of Loyola to the Dorrit place that lay a scant mile from the railway station.

On the edge of the town he passed the house of one Nan Miracle. The good people of Loyola affected to despise Nan Miracle, whose coming to the town had never been fully explained and whose secret life was spoken of in whispers among the women of the district. Lucian Dorrit looked cautiously from the corners of his eyes as he passed Nan Miracle's house. Although he did not retard his

step in the slightest, he saw the green picket fence that ran around the small, ivy-covered house, and the tiny patch of lawn in front where lay a bed of drying poppies and another of nasturtiums, sharp flowers.

Nan Miracle wove rugs on a loom, the materials for which were sent her by some tradesman in the city who paid her well, it was said, for the finished product. It was not only because of her secret and whispered life, however, down there so close to the section house and the railway tracks, that Nan Miracle's presence in Loyola was resented. She had a way with her when she spoke to the men of the town that was wholly out of place in a community as small as Loyola, nor was she ever known to seek the friendship of any of the women.

In the roadway beyond lay perfect stillness and deep warmth, the white dust starting occasionally before a freakish waltz of wind from the yellow stubble fields. Once, as he hurried along, Lucian stopped abruptly as the shock of distant blasting shook the air with violent reverberations.

"They're getting out stone in the Murker quarry," he thought to himself and started off along the road once more.

That sound of blasting had startled Lucian from his boyish day-dream years ago. The stone quarry on the Murker place, that great colored mass of glacial rock, had been a soaring mountain then, in Lucian's eyes. The very thought of it had frightened him and cost him many an uneasy night. When he had grown to sturdy boyhood he had set out one day resolved to lay the fear that had

risen before him with every thought of the Murker quarry. It had seemed, even then, an enormous distance from his home to the mountain, and once there, it was an enormous distance again to the top. But somehow he had reached that top, had seen a frightened rabbit break from cover and go darting madly down the farther side, and had found himself alone and miraculously unafraid with the wild wind sweeping by. Thereafter, when the mood was on him, he used to go there in the warm afternoons, lie on his back on the summit of the highest rock knoll, where tremendous winds and clouds incalculably white and large would catch him up, and he would ride in the sails of danger to the world's end. . . .

All that had been years ago. Old man Murker had died since then and Hattie Murker, his only daughter, had taken the place and done her father's memory credit in its management. It was Hattie Murker's quarry now where men were blasting stone. And suddenly it came to Lucian Dorrit that the years had made a man of him.

CHAPTER II

Where he lay in his bed close under the sloping rafters, Lucian Dorrit could look out upon the October dawn, pink, sweet, ironical, margining delicately the gray field his father had plowed two weeks before. The plowing had been done on a raw day, a day of cold rain and sleet, but what was a season's mood to the great frame of William Dorrit? Two days after Lucian's return from the harvest fields, however, William Dorrit had died of pneumonia.

To-day he was to be buried. His body lay in the parlor below, and the palling scent of funeral flowers pervaded the entire house, reaching even to the small room where Lucian lay. For some time Lucian had lain and thought about those flowers. His mother and his sister Leona, even his two brothers, had been proud of them. They had come all the way from the city and flowers from the city were seldom seen about Loyola, even at funerals. To Lucian, however, there was something almost obscene in the very smell that came up to him there under the sloping rafters.

"Flowers for Pa!" he said aloud, and the words were a groan. "O God!"

Lucian felt only the hypocrisy of it all—and the irony of it. Hattie Murker, whose farm adjoined the Dorrit

place on the north, had quarreled with William Dorrit over the sale of a dozen turkeys just a week before his illness. It was Hattie Murker who had sent to the city for the flowers. Agatha Dorrit had been praising Hattie loudly since the hour the flowers had come. They had revealed a forgiving, Christian spirit in her neighbor. As if William Dorrit, that man of mighty spirit, stood in any need of forgiveness! Tears of anger and shame for the insensibility of his family sprang into Lucian's eyes as he thought of the thing.

He listened for some sound in the house below. There was no stir. He crawled out from beneath the patchwork covers and scrambled into his clothes. With luck, he thought, he could get down-stairs and into the parlor without waking anybody, and have a last moment with his father alone.

In the narrow hallway below he passed his mother's open door. With all his old timidity toward her, he tiptoed by, glancing in furtively as he passed. There was something very chaste about the way she lay in her bed. The coverlet was unrumpled across her breast. Her long, bony hands were exposed with the faint gray shine of dawn upon them. She still lay, from long habit, well to the right in the great oak bed. She slept, as she did all other things, with a fierce, vigorous economy, not long, but soundly. As Lucian looked at her a sudden pang of pity for her smote him, a warmth that he could not remember ever having felt before, his boyish fear of her having always shut out other emotion.

He passed on silently to the room of his two younger

brothers, Arnold and Manlius. No grief of the spirit disturbed their slumber. They slept like two young bullocks, their curly red hair matting over their foreheads. Arnold, the younger of the two, slept with his mouth open and Lucian could see the gold tooth he had had inserted by a dentist once when he had run away to the city. The gold tooth had been acquired at the expense of a perfectly sound incisor of his own. He had been fifteen at the time and had coveted the gold tooth of a chum. His father had thrashed him soundly, but the boy had stubbornly refused to divulge the name of the dentist whose professional ethics had so totally forsaken him. The bold independence of Arnold and the unremitting hardness of Manlius were qualities that Lucian had never been able to understand. He was disturbed, uneasy about them, and sometimes they filled him with a sort of wistful envy.

Across the hallway from his brothers' room slept his little sister, Leona. She was temperamentally more like Lucian. She slept with her door closed. Since her fifteenth birthday she had been in the habit of locking her door at night, a habit which had puzzled and annoyed her mother. No one in the family knew what secrets she kept behind the locked door, what anxious adolescent thoughts she cherished there.

At the foot of the stairs in the lower hallway Lucian paused, his hand on one of the great wooden knobs that topped the pillars his father had built into the stairway. On the pillar beside which Lucian stood, William Dorrit had carved with laborious care the legend:

Straight is the line of duty,
Curved is the line of beauty;
Follow the straight line, thou shalt see
The curved line ever follow thee.

When his father had first carved the precept there, Lucian had thought it beautiful and true. Now—it filled him with a vague discomfort, incertitude.

In the parlor the blinds were closely drawn, and William Dorrit's casket, which stood on its supports in the center of the floor, was only a bulk of denser darkness in the gloom. Lucian had not yet seen his father in death. Two days before, when the body was returned from the undertaker's in Loyola, the family had filed into the parlor and had stood for a moment about the coffin. Lucian had been unable to bring himself to join them. Because of his refusal his mother had complained bitterly, as was her wont, and had called him obstinate, unnatural, feelingless. In his misery Lucian had not spoken a word in his own defense.

The sickly smell of lilies and white carnations mingled with the mustiness peculiar to unused country parlors. Lucian went to one of the windows and jerked up the blind, but the window itself remained fast. A flood of gray light filled the room. The black box in the center of the room stood out suddenly, with a dull, large luster, seeming to crowd the little parlor beyond its capacity. Lucian stole up to the black box and looked in.

There was on the face of William Dorrit a calm, a grandeur, that had not been there in life. The dignified indifference of death had come between him and the ig-

noble pain of living. He had stood six feet six in his fifty-seventh year, and his teeth were the teeth of a boy just grown. His hair was white and too fine. The face was full and broad and bony, markedly Irish—William Dorrit's mother had been Irish—and to this ruggedness the skin over the cheek-bones and above the shaggy brows was an extraordinary contrast of delicateness. In life William Dorrit had had an appraising way of looking at you, as though over the rims of spectacles, although he had never worn them. The stiffened lids had buried forever the look of those eyes, diffident, embarrassed, with the ghost of some long-remembered dream a-stalk in them. His hands were not the hands of a farmer. Wind and weather had never succeeded in making them their own. As Lucian slipped aside the glass and touched the smooth contours of those hands a wave of rebellious disbelief in his father's death swept over him.

"Pa—listen, Pa!" he whispered.

The sound of the words startled him. A tear plashed from his cheek to the satin edge of the casket. He replaced the glass. When he had pulled down the window-blind he moved quietly through the dining-room and the kitchen and let himself out by way of the back door.

The small and important noise of existence was beginning again in the barnyard and among the outhouses. There was a clucking and a fluttering in the chicken-coop, and the milch cows lowed impatiently with their heads thrust half-way through the bars of the milking pen. Down on the duck-pond there was an excited clatter that announced the arrival of a flock of wild duck from the marshes in

the north. The pallid glamour in the east had become a burst of rose and the air over the dark fields seemed to quiver with the coming light. Here and there on the ground there were great shadows, as though invisible immense wings were fleeing before the dawn.

A lump rose, hard as a knotted cord, in Lucian's throat as he recalled how his father had loved those early, vivid dawns; how he used to stand for a moment or two on the doorstep before he descended to his round of morning chores and thump his great chest with his fist from sheer joy of living.

Presently the family would be getting up and there would be the old familiar commotion about the yard and in the house. Suddenly the thought of life going on in its usual way became unbearable to Lucian. He quickened his step almost to a run down past the barns, held down the barbed wire that fenced a field, and climbed over with his long legs. An old cowpath led straight north into ground that had never been plowed and Lucian followed it until it dwindled away into the pocks of a dried slough. In the hardened mud he could see the prints of his father's hob-nailed boots where they had crushed down bits of greenish, slimy moss and manure into flat patterns against the black ground. The tracks would probably remain there now until the spring thaws came to obliterate them.

Beneath the misery of his thoughts Lucian had the feeling that he was running away from something. After those exalted weeks on the prairies where his heart had swelled with new hopes and he had looked forward to days

of warm companionship with that great man who was his father, after those pleasant hours of dreaming along the way where he had caught glimpses of the rare beauty that covers the world, it was not an easy task to accommodate himself to the new position into which his father's death had so suddenly thrust him. With his hands in his pockets, for the dawn air was cold, his head bare and his hair falling forward in a thick dark lock over his forehead, Lucian stretched himself to his full height and looked back at the farm buildings behind him.

The Dorrit farm looked exactly like the dozen others in the community, except that it was a little smaller, a little less well-equipped, a little shabbier than they. From where he stood in that north pasture, Lucian could see the caragana hedge his father had trained with such care on the south side of the house. The house itself was a lean, two-and-a-half-story affair from which the prairie wind had whipped most of the white paint. To Lucian it looked like a melancholy person with eyes set close together. A grove of cottonwoods partly concealed it from the main road on the west toward which its rather despondent veranda sloped. There was a small stoop at the rear with a railing across which grayish floor cloths were always drying. The barns and the sheds were drab for want of paint, the corncrib had been set askew by a July tornado; but there had been neither time nor money to spare for the necessary repairs.

Lucian stared at the buildings now gray and wan in the early light; at the flat fields surrounding them, a full section of land where the yield had never been very good.

All this was his now, *his* land, *his* buildings, *his* heritage. A sudden trembling seized him, a panic of emotion that was neither joy nor fear but a tumult of both. A gravity came into his face as he swept the horizon with his eyes, a new look that signaled the passing of the careless dreams of a boy.

Lucian knew that he would be expected to carry on the work of tilling those stubborn acres where William Dorrit had so abruptly quit his task. His mother, in fact, would take it for granted that he should. In sudden desperation Lucian ran his fingers through his hair and shut his eyes tight on the tears of which he was ashamed. Was it thus he should take the place of the man who had been robbed of the shining destiny intended for him? Oh, great William Dorrit, what were the vain agonies of your spirit, you who were meant for achievement among men, you who dragged your yoke like a dumb brute over these mean acres?

Lucian's eyes roved uneasily over the nearer fields where the somber plowed earth was becoming a sinister red under the dawn. His fingers tightened against his palms and the knuckles on his hands moved like white marbles under the taut, reddened skin. A handful of ground should not make a slave of him, should not break him as it had broken his father. It was not that he did not love the land, his father's land. It filled him with great, limitless emotions, ambitions. But there was something within him that had to get out, something that was too great for these narrow fields, something that scorned Loyola and its mean environs.

As he stumbled across the field he talked in a husky whisper as if his father were there walking beside him and listening. He and his father were like trees, he said, trees that had grown out of the prairie; but they had to spread upward, toward the sky and the light and the clear air. He talked on and on, half aloud, walking blindly ahead, until he came at last to the fence that marked the beginning of Hattie Murker's land. There he turned and looked backward over the way he had come.

Southward, past the Dorrit farm, lay the sprawling village of Loyola. That small yellow house that stood apart from the rest of the town, near the railroad track, was the house of Nan Miracle. It was at least two miles away from where Lucian stood now, but the sun striking flames from the eastern windows of the house made it seem very close. For a moment as Lucian permitted his mind to rest upon that house and the woman who lived in it his lips twisted with faint contempt and his nostrils narrowed sharply with young scorn. In the pool room in Loyola when men talked about Nan Miracle Lucian deliberately walked away or turned his back upon their unsavory jokes. Once, walking on the main street of the town with his sister Leona, he had seen Nan Miracle coming toward them and had quickly led his sister to the opposite side of the street.

To the north and slightly eastward from him stood Hattie Murker's house, with its single tall pine beside it and the handsome barns at the rear, aloof and solitary on its low hill. A half-mile to the eastward of the buildings

the stone quarry glimmered in the tender colors of the morning. Hattie had had men at work there blasting out stone, but to-day the quarry would be silent out of respect for the memory of William Dorrit. That might have been a generous gesture on the part of Hattie Murker, but Lucian knew she would take pains to let everyone know that she had done it.

Northwest, cornering Hattie Murker's land, bare of a single tree except for the stout willows that grew near the roadway, lay the homestead of Mons Torson. Though he was older than Lucian by at least seven years, he was the only man in the whole district of Loyola—with the possible exception of Doctor Muller—to whom Lucian would have gone in time of trouble. To Muller Lucian would have gone for help. To Torson he would have gone for understanding. It was to Mons he had gone the day after his return from the north. He knew that there he would find one who, next to his own father, would understand the exalted mood he had carried with him from his journey along the prairie roads. It was to Mons he had gone when he realized at last that William Dorrit could not live. He knew that there he would find one who, more than any other, would understand the inexpressible sense of loss that was breaking his heart. Mons Torson was ostentatiously irreligious and had expressed himself bluntly when he had heard that William Dorrit's funeral was to be held in a church.

"Hold it out on his fields—if you've got to have one of your damn' funerals," he had urged. "Don't go and coop him up with a lot of psalm-singers and black-coats.

Give him another smell of the earth with the air over it, for God's sake!"

East of the Murker place, just a mile from Mons Torson's, was the farm of another Norwegian, Peter Strand, a silent man with an invalid wife and a daughter of fourteen who came often to see Lucian's sister. Karen Strand was a strange, imaginative girl whose bright, impulsive ways were always a little baffling to Leona.

A thin vapor was rising now from the plowed field alongside the pasture and Lucian turned back home. Occasionally an impudent blackbird hopped out of his path, its early search for food scarcely interrupted by his coming. The sight of the birds made Lucian's heart even heavier than before. His father had been their great lover and many of them were very tame.

The family would be up and about by now. Lucian slipped down between the barns where he would be unobserved, and entered the tool shed. There were some things there that he had planned to take away on the day his father had died, but there had been so many other matters to attend to then. In one corner of the shed he found a padlocked chest that was half buried under a load of egg crates. With a key he carried he unlocked the chest and took from it a large bundle of papers, the corners of which were yellowed and curled. A piece of twine was tied about the bundle and on a tag attached to it was printed in red ink, "Notes on the Nipigon country trip." Agatha Dorrit had not permitted these memoirs a place in the house. She would have about her no reminders of the time when William Dorrit had left the

farm and taken a dangerous trip into the north country, facing hazards the like of which no married man, in her opinion, had any right to face.

Besides the notes, Lucian took from the chest a pair of battered binoculars, a rusted fishing reel, an old ivory-headed cane, and a glass specimen case of butterflies and insects that his father had mounted with his own hands when his wife's vigilant eyes were not on him. All these things Lucian placed in a stout wheat sack and tied a bit of rope securely about the top of it. This done, he seated himself on the earth floor of the tool shed. He spent some time there, sitting with his long arms about his knees, his eyes staring straight before him where the half open door looked out upon the barnyard and beyond toward the house. He hated the thought of going back to the house to hear all over again the daily theme of his mother's chiding, which even to-day would suffer no abatement. There was a cozy, earthy disorder about the tool shed that comforted him and softened, however little, the bleak, cruel fact of his father's death.

Presently he got up with the sack in his hand and went farther down the yard where the big red barn stood, its paint peeling in gray streaks. Sloping up against it in a dejected fashion was the wagon shed, exposed on one side and revealing the vehicular possessions of the Dorrits. The ancient black democrat which was to carry the Dorrit family to the funeral at Loyola stood there, and beside it the plow which William Dorrit had last driven. Lucian tucked the sack away under the back seat of the democrat and turned toward the house.

There was a slamming of the screen door as Lucian's brothers plunged out of the house and came toward the barn. Even to-day, Lucian thought as he watched them come down the path toward him, there was nothing quiet, nothing decorous in their attitude. But they were merry, generous boys and Luce was fond of them.

"Ma wants to know why you didn't make a fire in the kitchen stove, you gettin' up so early and all," Arnold called to him in passing.

Lucian's spirit was too heavy for protest. He saw smoke rising from the kitchen chimney and as he approached the house water from a wash-basin was flung from the doorway, making a translucent arc. Chickens came running to the spot where the water fell, looked about excitedly for scraps, and stalked off disappointed. The agonizing persistence of the familiar and homely details of living, the tenacity of inconsiderable things, made at that moment an ineradicable mark in Lucian's mind.

The kitchen door opened and Agatha Dorrit came out, wiping her hands on her apron. As far back as he could remember, Lucian's mother was always wiping her hands on her apron. At the sight of Lucian's tall form striding slowly up the pathway some sentiment either of tenderness or regret—or perhaps a sentiment that was a mingling of both—brought the tears suddenly to her eyes. She threw her apron up to her face and wept with sounds that were high and shrill, like the notes from some weird instrument. When she turned and went back into the house, Lucian followed her, uncomfortable in his new

feeling of pity, of tenderness toward her. He would have to be especially attentive to her to-day, show her in some little way that she alone would see, his deep sympathy and understanding.

By two o'clock the yard behind the Dorrit farm-house and the open space down below the barns were filled with rigs of all kinds hitched to trees, posts, corncrib and sheds. The women, and a few of the men, were indoors, but down by the wagon shed a number of farmers dressed in their awkward Sunday black or navy-blue squatted about on wagon tongues or leaned against the sides of the buildings. The day had become almost sultry and Manlius Dorrit had brought a bucket of lemonade and several dippers down to them. Now and then one of the men would help himself to some of the beverage and hang the dipper back by the crook of its handle on the side of the bucket. All eyes were turned, rather furtively, it seemed, in the general direction of the house.

"Wonder if Hattie Murker'll be there?" remarked Blundell, who ran a lunch counter in Loyola.

Two or three of the men snorted. One spat eloquently and shifted his cud of tobacco from one cheek to the other, grinning as he did so.

"She'll be there with bells on," he said. "Hattie Murker don't miss any funerals if she can help it—especially since Ben Torson went off the way he did."

The tragic death of Mons Torson's brother had been one of the major subjects of conversation for the past year. He was to have married Hattie Murker, but on the

day set for the wedding he had been thrown from his horse and had died a week later.

Myers, owner of the barber shop in Loyola, had left his business to come to the funeral because of a very genuine liking he had had for William Dorrit. The town looked to Myers for most of its home-made wit.

"And she'll be going to somebody's funeral the day she gets married, too," he observed. "Ben got out of it lucky, the way he did it. When I see her go by the shop I say to myself, Myers, old boy, you didn't pick any prize beauty when you teamed up with your missus, but you can be darned glad you didn't pick Hattie Murker!"

A subdued chuckle greeted his sally.

"It's just about a year ago now, isn't it, since that happened?" asked a young farmer who had lately come to the district.

"Jist about," Blundell informed him. "And you can say what you like about it, but every time I think of it, I get to feelin' that Ben wasn't so dead anxious to marry her—whatever the reason was—and he jist let that horse do for him rather than——"

"Aw, get out, Joe!" Myers interrupted. "Ben wasn't that kind of a fool. He'd probably let a woman get him, but no horse would get the better of Ben Torson if he could help it. He wouldn't 'a' gone that way about it."

"Well, there was something funny about the way it happened," Blundell insisted.

"And she sure hates Mons Torson ever since," observed Joe Finch, whose land lay north of the Torson place.

"That's natural, too," Myers urged. "She lost that prize heifer of hers in Torson's muskeg just a week after Ben's funeral. If Mons looked after his fences a little——"

"An' she felt worse about the cow than she did about Ben Torson, too," put in another.

"Well," Blundell chuckled, "she'll have to pay good money if she wants another heifer like the one she lost. She can get a man for nothing. And she will, too, don't worry. She's got all that land and she's smart as hell—and young and handsome. I got to admit that."

"She sure is," Myers agreed, "but she's old man Murker all over again."

"They tell me he was a hard one," remarked the young farmer who had lately come to Loyola.

"Hard? Good Lord!" Blundell exclaimed. "All you got to do is to look at young Bert Murker to know jist what that old devil *would* do. Bert would 'a' been all right to-day if the old man hadn't knocked him off the binder in one of his fits. Bert would 'a' took over the farm and run it instead o' Hattie if that hadn't happened. Now look at him! Strong enough, but no sense left. And Hattie works him like an ox!"

"Sh-h-h!" Myers cautioned.

A heavy silence fell upon the crowd as Hattie Murker appeared suddenly where the road leading to the house passed the corner of the wagon shed. She was seated alone in a new buggy, the reins she held in her hands drawn taut over the sleek withers of a shining black mare.

"Some mare!" the farmer from sixteen miles west of Loyola whistled under his breath.

At a little after two o'clock Lucian and his brothers, assisted by three of William Dorrit's friends, bore the closed coffin out of the house while the men stood about with bared heads, the women with downcast faces. A pause seemed to come in the very wind above that bare farmyard as the body of the great William Dorrit moved through it for the last time in the inviolable beauty and integrity of absolute death. The shabby house, graying through its ancient coat of white, the shabbier barns, the sagging picket fence that leaned against a briar patch on one side of the yard, the vegetable garden stripped now of its harvest save for the golden globes of pumpkins lighting the brown earth, bore the sorrowful, bleak and lonely color of death as it comes to the northern prairie. Here death cannot draw about its piteousness a glamour of ritual; the prairie exposes it without mercy, and only the mystical dignity inherent in it remains. Death here is like a withered stalk in the midst of desolation that still stands and takes the sun.

Agatha Dorrit, straight and stiff as a lath in her cheap black taffeta, came down the walk and took her place in the family democrat, looking neither to the left nor to the right. A moment later the family crowded in after her, Lucian taking his place in the driver's seat.

Noon burned blue over the world on that day in late October. The hard dirt road stretched like a band of gray lead to the town of Loyola and beyond into a watery, wavering mirage against the horizon. To the east and

west reached the royal, insolent prairie, flat and uncompromising as the hand of God; to the north the tawny bouquets of color that marked the beginning of the bush country; burnished stubble ashine over acre after rolling acre; thorn-apple trees cropping out in the hollows like round cushions stuck full of bright, red-headed pins; the strong, heady savor of the earth where the plow had lately been and where the cold nights had brought their dews with a threat of frost to come. This was the road that was only a grassy wheel-rut when William Dorrit took it one August day long ago when the tiger-lilies blazed over those rolling fields, before any plow had cleaved their glory and turned it under the dark furrow. O bold, inveterate blue sky, that has calmly accepted the coming and going of the northern pioneers, is there no weakness, no death in you, or in this prairie, your confederate?

The little church in Loyola was already well filled when they bore the body of William Dorrit down the wide aisle to the altar. It was not until the service was begun that Lucian, sitting beside his mother in the front row, saw that Hattie Murker had taken a seat directly across the aisle from him.

Hattie Murker had never been called "pretty" or "lovely." She was colloquially "handsome" and to strangers "striking." She had just passed into her twenty-sixth year, but because of a certain severity in her bearing she looked thirty. She had very black, glossy hair that waved in a trained fashion over her ears and the part down the center of it was bluish and conspicuous. She was of little more than medium height, but the erect-

ness of her carriage and the slight tilt of her very fine chin gave her the appearance of one very much taller. Her shoulders were square almost to angularity, her hands and wrists bony, her breast and hips aggressively voluptuous. She had the dark, burning eyes of a Gipsy and the white skin of a madonna.

Lucian looked across at her once or twice during the hymns and noticed, with absent-minded irrelevance, the peculiarly grown-up, waxen convolutions of her ears. When they had gone to school together, Lucian had always thought of her as one of the older girls and she was still, to him, somewhat loftly and mysterious. As he glanced down at Hattie's hands it occurred to him that they were not unlike his mother's. His eyes moved sideways and he saw a tear fall from his mother's cheek to the hymn-book that lay in her lap. Awkwardly he put out a hand and patted the dull black silk over her knee. Agatha Dorrit gave a long sigh and Lucian's heart beat with the certainty that for once in her life she was not disapproving of him.

The service over, there followed a half-hour or more during which those who had come to the church moved down the aisle and looked for the last time on the face of William Dorrit. Hattie Murker got up from her place and after gazing for a brief moment at the still face turned and shook hands solemnly with Agatha Dorrit. At a glance from his mother, Lucian shifted a little to one side and Hattie sat down between them, whispering words of comfort to her neighbor. Lucian, his arm pressed close to Hattie's shoulder, had a sense of contact with something

violent and strange. Vaguely he remembered the heavy scent of flowers that had come up to him that morning where he lay in bed under the sloping rafters. Without looking at her now he was acutely conscious of her ears—and, beneath her hat, her black hair with its precise part, bluish and conspicuous. Before his eyes the slow procession of farmers and townspeople passed in a faint blur.

It was late afternoon when they arrived at the cemetery and the light of the low October sun threw long rays of amber into the purple of that secluded place. Lucian had taken from beneath the back seat of the democrat the wheat sack he had placed there early that morning. When it came time for the body to be lowered into the place that had been made for it, he prayed silently for courage to do what he had planned. Close beside him his mother stood, erect, resolute, immovable in that final gesture attending the passing of William Dorrit. Lucian looked at her standing there. Then, instead of dropping the bag into the grave as soon as the box had been lowered, he hid it behind him and later carried it back and placed it under the seat in the democrat.

The tears that filled his eyes then were not of grief, but of humiliation. Fierce shame and rebellion surged though him as he realized that he had permitted the presence of his mother to frustrate him in the last little expression of affection, the last little service he could ever do for the great William Dorrit.

The small and mean concerns of living returned again, smaller and meaner than ever now after the presence of

death. For a few days there were visitors who came and did what they could to bring cheer to the Dorrit home. Aunt Ella Blake and her dapper little husband who had arrived from Lost River on the day of the funeral had gone back on the following day. Ella Blake had outdone herself in an effort to comfort Agatha Dorrit, but Lucian knew that she was glad to get away again. Mons Torson had come down the day after the funeral and had lingered for an hour with Lucian while he worked about the barns. Doctor Muller had spent an afternoon and an evening with the family, silent most of the time and gazing from the windows at the yellow fields and the cold skies, strangely restless and ill-at-ease. Lucian had gone with him to the stable when it was late and the two had hitched Muller's team to his buckboard without speaking more than a half-dozen words. When he was in his seat, however, and the reins in his hands, Muller had looked down at Lucian where he stood with the lantern in his hand.

"I've been wondering what you'll do now, Luce," he said quietly, his voice betraying more concern that he would have admitted openly.

"Just—stay on, I guess," Lucian replied. "What else?"

Muller did not reply at once. His lips drew into a tight line as he lifted his face and peered into the darkness.

"The Almighty is a rum comedian," he observed at last, and with a shake of his reins he drove away.

And during the days that followed Lucian came to know something of what old Doctor Muller had meant. Sordid realities thrust themselves upon him faster than he could

prepare himself to receive them. His mother, occupied with the petty, unlovely interests of a narrow life, her feelings blunted by poverty and hard work, turned upon him with the same fierce will that had dominated William Dorrit and filled Lucian's waking hours with reasonless complaining. Without his knowing it, every vestige of the tenderness he had felt for his mother in the day of her grief gradually deserted him and left his heart cold toward her. Even when he sought escape, as his father had done, by spending long hours in the fields and about the barns, the withering atmosphere was about him.

Arnold and Manlius, perhaps unconsciously envious of their older brother's sudden advance in life, spared no pains to remind him that they were working for him now and that they were bound to respect him as a landowner and the head of a household. Much of what they said, of course, had been spoken in a bantering mood, but beneath it all there was a note of resentment that was almost incredible to Lucian. His attempts to talk to them only made it worse. When he felt he could stand it no longer, he resolved upon a visit to Mons Torson.

After a night and a day of snowfall, the first of the season, Lucian took his way north along the road on foot. The sky had cleared and the moon had turned the prairie to a glittering white. Never had the sky seemed so enormous or the full globe of the moon so near.

Lucian remembered another night like this when he had walked this same roadway from Loyola to the Dorrit place. He was twelve years old at the time. It was Christmas Eve and he had been working during a week

of school holidays in Melham's store in order that his younger brothers and his little sister should not go without gifts. His arms were loaded with parcels. The night had been white and glittering and tender with its burden of feathery snow, as it was to-night. Suddenly a small dark figure had darted into the roadway ahead of Lucian and had come running to meet him. As he remembered the eagerness of that little stout figure of his brother Arney, panting and stumbling to meet him and relieve him of some of his bundles, Lucian's eyes filled with tears. What had become of that little pudgy, beloved brother whose eyes had shone in that cold Christmas moonlight so long ago? An imaginative excitement came upon Lucian. He could see Arney running ahead of him now, his arms hugging the parcels he had given him. Soon they would be home and Lucian would be warming his feet in the oven of the kitchen stove, and a leathery smell would rise from his wet shoes, and he would see the glittering Christmas tree through the door to the dining-room. His father would be there, as excited as the children, pinning a tattered but brave silver star to the spire of the tree. . . . Lucian started to run for sheer happiness.

O, swift, fierce Life, you who overtake and ride down the spirit with your chariot of beauty! O, white, white prairie, prairie of dream, prairie from the plains of the dead moon, where is the heart in you?

Mons Torson's place was in darkness. As Lucian turned away, disappointed, he saw a light in Hattie Murker's house where it stood up the short slope from the gate. Someone stood at the gate, a black shadow in the

moonlight. Lucian moved slowly until he was close enough to see that it was Hattie herself, a dark shawl over her head and shoulders.

"Hello!" he called. "That you, Hattie?"

For a second or two there was no reply. "Yes, it's me," she said finally, standing immobile in the moonlight. "Oh—it's Luce Dorrit!"

Lucian was face to face with her now. She stood still, transfixed in the glamour, as though she had been standing there for hours before he came. Almost as though she had been waiting for him!

"I came up to see Mons," he told her.

"He's in town," she said.

She pushed back the shawl from her head and now Lucian could see her eyes, intensely dark and somber. They seemed without expression, except for something elemental—the smoldering economy of feeling that an animal has.

"Won't you come in?" she invited him.

She seemed to sway toward him across the gate. Her black shawl seemed to envelop him. He wanted suddenly, cravingly, to warm his hands on her body. There would be a white, pale, indescribable moonlight heat about her. The gate swung open and Lucian went through it, his pulses quickening savagely.

They were within the door of the Murker kitchen. One of the covers of the kitchen range was red and the air above it quivered. A tall glass lamp stood on the oilcloth-covered table, its wick floating in reddish kerosene. The warmth of the room swept sensationally over

Lucian. Hattie Murker was hanging her shawl on a hook beside the door. She turned to him, but remained standing near the door, her shoulders straight and angular against the white wall. Lucian could see the distinct, bluish part in her hair.

"Bert is gone to Lost River with Steve Aronson," she told him.

The snow again. White, white net of beauty, net of dream, trapping the earth, trapping the helpless heart of life. . . .

Lucian was at home again, in the dining-room where sat his mother, his brothers and Leona who had been his little sister. She seemed suddenly older now, that little sister, with something in her eyes that betrayed the vanishing of simplicity. Lucian looked from one to the other. They were all different. He drew himself up stubbornly. He would have to tell them somehow. His mother would be incredulous, pleased, flattered, voluble. Hattie Murker was older than he, steadier, and she had money. His brother—the bold Manlius—the pudgy little Arney who ran ahead of him there in the moonlight. . . .

"I'm going to marry Hattie Murker on Christmas Day," he told them.

Because they could not speak from amazement, he turned away quickly and went to his room. In the darkness he flung himself across his bed, buried his face in the blankets, gripped his head between his hands.

"Christ!" he said aloud, and the word was a prayer from out of his heart.

"Luce!"

Lucian scrambled to a sitting position on the edge of his bed to find Leona standing in the middle of the floor. She came and sat on the foot of the bed, her light hair a shadowy aureole in the moonlight. Suddenly she began to cry.

"What's the matter with you?" Lucian demanded harshly.

"Oh—Luce—why—why did you do it?" she sobbed.

Lucian did not reply. He felt sick, unutterably tired.

Leona brushed her tears away with an impatient gesture and got to her feet defiantly.

"I'm going to tell her to leave you alone, Luce!" she declared. "I'm going to!"

Lucian sprang up fiercely. "Don't you dare!" he warned her. "I've—I've got to go through with it. Don't you dare!"

He pushed her out of the room and locked the door behind her.

PART TWO

MONS TORSON

CHAPTER III

The winter at Loyola that year was one of brittle, glassy cold. The earliest settlers could not remember when the ice had been so deep on the lakes and streams, and an aged half-breed trapper near Lost River declared that there had not been such a season for half a century. The white, life-devouring winds from the north and the east swooped down hungrily on the little unsheltered prairie town and its surrounding prairie farms and went screaming on, a fiend of frozen lust. The tongues of the wind lapped at the snow on the rivers, licked it up into great edged white spines and left exposed wide expanses of green, dark ice, crystalline and mysterious. A pale sun traveled reluctantly over its daily route and at night the sky was a silver frosty lace of stars.

Early in January, less than a month after the marriage of Lucian Dorrit and Hattie Murker, the frail wife of Peter Strand died on the farm that lay just east of the Murker place. There had been something very bleak and relentless in the way that death had come to Peter Strand's wife. Lucian had felt the irony of his father's death. Here, however, he felt the cold cruelty, the heartlessness of it. Lucian could not have believed that a man could break down so completely as Peter Strand had done on that bitter January day of the funeral. Nor had he ever seen anyone weep as Karen Strand had wept that day.

The cruelty of it all would probably not have touched

Lucian so deeply had he not known, rather intimately, the brave efforts Peter Strand had put forth in his struggle with life on the prairies. He and his wife had come from Norway and had settled near Loyola some fifteen years ago. Mrs. Strand had been a delicate, pretty woman, with eyes as blue as the northern sea from which she came, and she had shed much sweetness about her in that rigid prairie life. Peter Strand had done well there, but his wife had not taken kindly to the new world and had slowly pined away for her native fjords. At the end of their first year in the district their only child, Karen, had been born and for a time they were very happy.

One spring, by dint of colossal labor without help in the fields, Strand had managed to send his wife and daughter for a visit to Norway, but the sensitive heart of the little woman had found no happiness in the beauty of those northern mountains without her mate. She had returned, given herself for a few years more to the service of the church in Loyola where she had been organist, played and laughed and sung with her growing daughter, worked and hoped and dreamed with the faithful Peter Strand—and died at last, leaving despair in the hearts of those who had loved her.

Heartless, however, as that experience had seemed to Lucian Dorrit, there had been one other incident during those bleak months of early winter that had left him utterly desolate for a time and had caused him to wonder whether there was a heart in the world anywhere. He had lost his friend, Mons Torson.

It was Bert Murker who had gone to Torson with the news that Lucian Dorrit was going to marry Hattie. Torson had refused to believe the story until he had had it confirmed by rumors that were afloat in Loyola. Now, in that prairie country a man can go about his work on a small, cheerless homestead, year in and year out, with a mind solitary and at peace—or he can have a mind attended by a thousand devils. But when a man moves with the slow, gentle and yet ironical obstinacy of Mons Torson, there is no telling what is in his mind.

But one thing is sure, and that is that since Mons had been forced to accept the story that Bert Murker had told him, there were nights that drove him out of his house, out upon the stark, wind-driven prairie, out anywhere at all so long as he was not left to himself within the close confines of his own four walls. Sometimes he would spend the whole night puttering about the barn, startling the drowsy beasts in their stalls with the sudden ghostly nimbus of his lantern; or mending broken implements in the wagon shed where his fingers would become cracked and swollen with the cold. His ear would be ever alert to catch a sound, a footfall, a voice.

Some night, he knew, Lucian Dorrit would find the courage to come. Mons Torson was afraid of what he might tell him if he did. And so he moved about his place as if he were trying to hide from something. When he was in his house he kept the lamp turned low, the shades drawn, the door locked. And his cat—it had been his brother Ben's cat—would sit, blackly fixed against the whitewashed wall of the "shack," luminously, unwhole-

somely at gaze where human eye would not dare to follow.

Finally, one blowing night, the cat's eyes turned sharply to the door. A knock had come there. Mons Torson blew out the light and sat motionless. He heard Luce Dorrit outside, calling, knocking. At last he heard Lucian's retreating footfall, and for many silent hours following, Mons sat alone in the darkness and heard the echo of his friend's voice, calling, calling.

Then, because he had not the courage to stay, Mons Torson left before another week and took his way north to the winter camps on Lake Superior. And Lucian, because he was sure that his friend had been there and had known of his coming, went about for days in utter bewilderment and a desolate sense of loss.

The still, deadly cold bore down upon the Murker farm on its bare knoll, wove fast its unscrupulous web enclosing all life there in unescapable privacy.

The Murker house was high and rectangular, with a low summer kitchen at the end nearer the farm buildings, and a porch with six slender pillars at the other end facing the road. At the foot of the hill grew a row of six evergreens shadowing the highway, and beside the house, sentinel-like and austere, there was a single pine-tree. In summer the slope down to the road was a flag of color that could be seen for miles away. Hattie always won prizes for her blooms at the county fair. She could grow rare varieties on that windy slope that would take root nowhere else in the district—she was that willful, people said.

The buildings and equipment were more modern than those of other farms in the district. People in Loyola hinted—they really knew little about it—that Hattie deprived herself of the mere decencies of life in order that her farm might boast the healthiest stock in the country. Mert Naley, of Castle's Livery Barn, declared that she wore long black skirts because she was without stockings underneath. And didn't they have it from her brother—Bert Murker's own words, unreliable though they were—that she often forced him to do with two meals a day when she was saving for some coveted improvement on the farm? She was her father all over again, anyone could see that, the "dead spit" of him. If it hadn't been for old man Murker, poor Bert would be something more than a child now. Everybody said that it was his beating the boy that had done it, and they wouldn't put it past Hattie.

Within doors of the Murker house there was an atmosphere of complete serenity, order. A house where no woman lives, but which is kept immaculate by a man, will have that same vacant, unlived-in air about it. The chief reason for this condition was that living went on in the kitchen, and a flight of stairs leading up from the kitchen permitted entry to the sleeping quarters in the upper part of the house without the necessity of passing through the parlor and the dining-room. Even the kitchen was approached through the summer-house, where wet overcoats, hats, overshoes must be removed.

The dining-room, used only when there was "company," the parlor, and the spare bedroom which opened into the

parlor, were all furnished in the complicated knickknack fashion of farm-houses—curly, high-polished furniture; figured linoleum; braided rag rugs, round and oblong; a china closet in the parlor containing inscribed seashells, silver spoons and a copper pin-tray with raised images of sky-scrapers and monuments, souvenirs from eastern cities mysteriously foregathered here; a fragile pink porcelain slipper wearing on its instep a great ormolu rose; a cut-glass berry bowl, a large green mustache-cup bearing the word "Father" in gold. On the walls hung pictures in ponderous frames, pictures of storms at sea and of pastoral scenes impossibly fair. The front part of the house was rarely heated except when there were visitors, and then a large stove with a bulging belly of isinglass panes would glow red in its corner in the dining-room. On the coldest days Hattie was forced to make a fire there in order to heat the rooms up-stairs by means of the pipe which led through them to the chimney.

Anyone looking in through the window of the Murker kitchen on one of these winter evenings would have been struck by the incongruous company of three seated within; might have thought that here was a crazy stage set with three scenes run into one, three characters fused by the glow of the lamp and yet utterly separate, each in its own nimbus. Luce Dorrit, seated in an upright chair, leaning forward over a book open on his knees, reading the same line again and again with monotonous, unseeing repetition; Hattie, his wife, rocking slowly to and fro in the low cane-bottom rocking-chair, her hands full of sew-

ing, her fingers making swift, dexterous knots in the thread; and Bert Murker, large, lumpy, round-bodied, his small eyes rising like half-moons over his fat cheeks and shifting from his corn-popper on the kitchen stove to Luce Dorrit in his chair, with a cunning, evil look, at once crafty and stupid.

There would be few words exchanged on such an evening in that low-ceilinged room with its staid pattern of light and shadow. The watcher at the window might see Hattie pause now and then in her rocking, breath held, and lift her head in an attitude of listening to some sound outside the house. He might see Bert go quietly to the built-in cupboard, come back to the stove with a plate of butter in his hand and melt it to pour over his pop-corn. There would be no word spoken as he offered his fluffy white confection to Hattie and Luce in turn, his eyes greedily watching what each took. There would be the sound of a chair being drawn to the stove as Bert seated himself with his feet in the oven, the dish of pop-corn in his lap, then renewed silence as he ate with wolfish haste, licking the butter from his fingers when he had done.

At the end of an hour or two, Hattie would get up noisily, carry her sewing-basket into the dining-room and place it behind the hood of the sewing machine which stood between two windows. She would return directly, slow and very straight, arrange precisely the doily on the back of her rocker, pick up the few broken threads and scraps of cotton lying on the floor, roll them into a tight ball and throw them into the fire. Then she would lift the

lamp from the table, look down at Lucian, and presently, through the motes that danced in the light before her, would come her voice—incisive, yet curiously subdued: "It's time to go to bed!"

Strange, however, as that household was guessed to be, its curious visitors that winter were few. In an existence narrowed by rigorous cold, even the hardy folk contained their curiosity and let the visits of two or three whose interest in the matter was insupportable secure for them the news of life on the Murker Farm, as it was still called.

It was no mere curiosity, however, that brought Peter Strand and Karen from their farm to the east, nearly a mile through snow and cold, to spend an hour in the Murker kitchen.

"I could not stand it over dere to-night—alone vit' the little girl," Peter explained one night as he seated himself before the stove, his angular frame bending forward, his thin hands hanging down between his large knees, his great eyes staring. "I could hear my Anna singing in the vind, Luce. I svear, by heaven, I did. I hear her valk on the stone—just outside the door—and I go and look outside and the door blow shut behind me—like she vant to keep me out dere vit' her. I go in again—and I hear music like the church organ—all round the house. And Carrie, she hear it too. Didn't you, Carrie?"

Solemnly he turned his eyes to Karen and she nodded her head in reply. Lucian's heart ached for the big man, haunted by his love that would not die with death. He looked at Hattie, wondering if she, a woman, could not say something to comfort the stricken man.

Hattie had sat down in the only rocking-chair in the room. She rocked slowly to and fro, her hands clasped in her lap.

"It isn't Christian to believe such things, Peter Strand," she said without looking at him. "Ghosts! In my family, such fears were spanked out of us children soon's we showed 'em. You can't expect comfort from the Lord unless you believe in God's word. The dead stays buried until the Judgment Day, Peter Strand. They don't go walking round playing church organs where there ain't any."

For several minutes there was total silence save for the rhythmic creaking of Hattie's rocker against the floor. Outside there was a rushing sound of the wind in the branches of the tall pine tree that stood in front of the house. Peter Strand sat as though he had not heard Hattie's voice. Presently he spoke in a very low tone, as though he were talking to himself rather than replying to what Hattie had said.

"Some people see t'ings—and hear t'ings—and some people don't. I t'ink so—yes. I valk beside Mons Torson's place last fall and he's out in the rain—digging up dose villows on hees ples. A fonny man, don't vant a little villow to stand. I t'ink sometimes he see t'ings in dose villows. I t'ink so—yes. Maybe he hear t'ings too."

It was evident that Hattie was becoming more and more uncomfortable. Her chair had been moving faster and more jerkily as she listened to Peter Strand's mutterings. Suddenly it ceased altogether.

"You were talking about a new plow for the spring work, Peter," she said abruptly. "There's one down in the shed here that'll be just as good as any new one you can buy. I'm gettin' a new sulky in the spring and I won't need the one I have. You can have it if you want. It'll save you that money." She got up and went to where the lantern hung from its nail on the wall. "Come out with me and I'll show it to you. Hand me my coat there, Luce."

"Let me take Peter down," Lucian suggested.

"You look after Carrie," she said. "Hand me my coat."

Lucian could not help a feeling of mild surprise at Hattie's abruptness. There was much about his wife that he did not fully understand as yet, but he had never thought of her as impulsive. He knew that she was capable of kindness, but he had never heard her speak a good word for Peter Strand. Besides, although they had talked of buying a gang-plow in the spring, Lucian did not know that Hattie had made up her mind about it.

As soon as the door had closed behind Hattie and Peter Strand, Karen turned to Lucian.

"She doesn't like me," she said suddenly, in the direct way that had been one of the first things Lucian had noticed in the little daughter of Peter Strand when she had come with her father, years ago, to visit William Dorrit.

Karen had been only a child then and Lucian had been a boy of twelve. But he had never forgotten the look that had come into her face when he had whistled for her the song of the brook that ran through the Dorrit

farm. Lucian's imitative efforts had been little more than faintly suggestive, but Karen had listened as one enraptured. When she had started school, it was Lucian who had seen her safely home in the early darkness of winter afternoons. And although she had grown since then—she was fourteen now—and taken on the expressions and mannerisms of her elders, Lucian still thought of her as a mere child, a wistful embodiment of those days when the world was still unreal and the brook was peopled with the frail creatures of his fancy.

Lucian looked at her and laughed.

"Why, Spingle!" It was a name he had given her years before, for no earthly reason at all. "Everybody likes you, Spingle!"

She made no reply. She looked about her, at the door leading to the main part of the house, at the stairway leading from the kitchen to the rooms above.

"Where is Bert?" she asked.

"In bed—an hour ago."

She got from her chair quickly and hurried to where she had hung her coat on the wall beside the door. When she had rummaged about in the pockets for a moment she drew out some bits of paper and came back to Lucian.

"I've done some more drawings," she told him and held out the papers in her hand.

Lucian took the drawings and went to the table where he spread them out under the lamp. They were delicate, remarkable copies of fay creatures from tales illustrated by Edmund Dulac and Rackham. Karen stood back with breathless expectancy while Luce bent over and examined

them, one by one. When he had seen them all he straightened up and looked at her with frank admiration in his eyes.

"Spingle, they're great!" he exclaimed.

Proud as she was of his praise, she said nothing, but gathered the drawings up hastily and hurried them back into her coat pocket again.

"And you're still dreaming of being an artist some day —in the big world, Carrie?" Lucian asked her when they had gone back to their chairs beside the kitchen stove.

"It isn't a dream," she protested. "I'm *going* to be."

Something touched Lucian then with an infinite sadness. What a pensive, delicate little face she had. He had never looked at that face without thinking of a ring of brown and gold elves dancing. Now he thought of something more. He thought of the heart-break that awaited her whose wild feet were already set toward a stern goal.

How little Karen Strand knew of the world she had resolved to conquer!

"Don't you love to sit like this and just *listen!*" she said, almost in a whisper. "Kjaere is right. Some people *can* hear things—and see them, too. I can hear the Norns—I can hear them now—crooning and wafting in the wind outside."

She sat up very straight in her chair, the lamplight shining on her round forehead and dancing in the green-gold of her eyes.

They sat still for minutes. Presently Lucian's dog stole out from behind the stove, his ears pointed, his eyes fixed. He whined, barked sharply. Karen laughed and

got down on the floor beside him. Putting her arms about his neck, she kissed the dog squarely on the brow, then drew back a little and looked at him thoughtfully.

"He has sly ears—and he has sly eyes—and he sees and hears what we can't surmise!" she said softly.

Lucian chuckled to himself and would have spoken had the door not opened just then to admit Hattie and Peter Strand. While Hattie removed her coat and shawl, Peter warned Karen that they must be getting home at once. The girl got to her feet regretfully and put on her things. The dog stretched, yawned and went back to his place behind the stove.

Good nights were called and the Strands disappeared into the darkness. Lucian stood watching from the open doorway until a sudden swirl of snow was driven across the kitchen floor. He closed the door quickly and followed Hattie, who had taken the lamp from the table and was already half-way up the stairs.

There is a point at which curiosity finds its way barred by a sense of the fitness of things. There is a limit beyond which a human being will not go in his desire to spy upon a neighbor. He may wonder greatly, speculate recklessly, jest obscenely, yet refuse to permit his curiosity to mislead him to the extent of intruding upon another's privacy.

In all these respects the town of Loyola had functioned as normally as one could wish. The marriage of Lucian Dorrit and Hattie Murker had stirred Loyola as had few other events in the history of the district. Notwithstand-

ing all the speculation and jesting, however, a native shyness, born, doubtless, of an unconscious self-respect, was a bridle to the most impatient curiosity, and Hattie and Lucian were left to themselves for the most part during the early weeks of their married life.

In every community, however, and for every rule, someone invariably provides the exception. In Loyola the rule was proven by Mrs. Blundell, wife of him who presided daily over the lunch-counter that stood next to Melham's store. While there were men in Loyola who would have learned of the sudden death of Mrs. Blundell with unconcealed elation, there were women in the town who blessed her name and made their shopping tours to the cities twice a year in the full confidence that their husbands would not abuse their freedom during their absence. A husband moves cautiously under a vigilant eye. And there was little that escaped the sharp eye of Mrs. Blundell, in town or out of it.

A neighborly visit to Agatha Dorrit just a fortnight after the wedding of Hattie and Lucian had repaid Mrs. Blundell poorly enough for her pains. She had worn her hard, bowler-shaped, white satin hat with the white plumes stylishly on the side and she had driven out in her smart black cutter on an afternoon of nipping frost. She had stayed long enough to have Mrs. Dorrit tell her that Hattie was a strong, good woman and that Luce had done mighty well. She had returned to town a bit crestfallen and disappointed, but more determined than ever.

She had let a decent two weeks slip by before she drove north again, this time to visit Hattie herself. She was

none the less jaunty, alert and all-perceiving, although the end of her slightly pointed nose had been bitten by frost along the way. Hattie heartened her with coffee and layer-cake beside the bulging heater in the dining-room.

"Well, well, and how does it feel to be cooking and washing and mending for another man, Hattie, and doing as much of the outside work as ever, I suppose?" she plunged as soon as she had shaken a little of the chill from her spare body. "I'd think it'd just about wear a woman out—and you've been used to having no one round but Bert to look after."

Hattie's face was calm, unperturbed by the fine-edged observation of her visitor.

"No, Mrs. Blundell," she replied, "Lucian doesn't let me get tired out. He takes care of the outside work himself. I've got only the housework now. There ain't many like Luce Dorrit."

The visitor bit her lip. She might have been thinking of Joe Blundell just then.

"I guess you're right, Hattie," she said, "though I did think poor Ben would have made you a good husband."

Hattie winced a little in spite of herself. She drew herself up, smoothing her hair back over her ear.

"I thought so, too—once. But I guess that wasn't to be. It makes me think that the right marriages are made in Heaven—and that's what Luce thinks, too."

"But you did it all so sudden, like."

"I would 'a' waited a while, but Luce wanted it to be right soon." She clasped her hands tightly in her lap. "And I'm glad he had his way about it."

"Of course, there's not many girls that could 'a' had their pick of the young men like you, Hattie. But how does Bert like the new arrangement?"

Hattie smiled. "Bert likes anything I do. And besides, he always liked Luce. Everything is going to come along fine between them."

The conversation was proceeding rather jerkily, but Mrs. Blundell was not the woman to retire from the field without at least a sharp skirmish. She had been looking about the room, taking mental notes.

"Well," she smiled genially, "I must say you have a real nice place to begin your married life in, Hattie. It ain't many girls that are so *fortch'nit*. My, what lovely rag rugs them are!"

"Yes, it's comfortable enough here. And it's plenty big enough just now. We'll be building in a year or so."

"Going to build?" Mrs. Blundell's eyes were very wide.

"Yes. Stone."

"Oh!"

"Yes," Hattie said as she settled back reflectively in her chair. "Luce and I think people oughtn't to be married unless they want children. The house is too small for more than just us and Bert. Luce and I were talking it over just last night. We'll use the stone from our own quarry. It's more lasting than wood or brick—and we'll be needing it for a long time to come."

"You will, indeed, if your plans work out."

"We are going to make them work out, Mrs. Blundell."

"Of course, of course. I mean that plans sometimes

have a way of turning out different than we expected. It was so with poor Ben Torson, but I always say——"

Hattie's eyes had moved contentedly to the window through which she could see one of her own fields lying white with snow. Across the road, there, lay Mons Torson's place. Her eyes narrowed almost perceptibly as they took in the tangle of willows lying in a slight hollow just below Torson's house. Mons Torson had burned those willows out last spring, but before harvest time they were struggling forth again, an insidious, determined growth, and Mons had left them alone. A slight sharpness appeared about Hattie's nostrils. Mrs. Blundell was talking sociably, but Hattie did not hear her. Her mind was out there in that dark smudge of willows.

There were church people in the district who thought it a scandal that old Doctor Muller should call his gray team Sodom and Gomorrah. There were others who, regarding the lamentable wrecks that hauled the doctor about the country, were convinced that there could be no sacrilege in the use of names that were so obviously appropriate.

They were reluctant beasts on the road. They were overfed and yet they managed to keep themselves spitefully thin. Muller cursed them continually, vowed after every trip that he would rid himself of them, and loved them like brothers. They were undoubtedly possessed of uncanny gifts. If Muller had been tippling unwisely, a sudden galloping of his team would restore him to instant sobriety and he would come to his case prepared

to exercise his utmost skill. Nor were they without their grim sense of humor. Muller often told of the night when they tore into the farmyard of an old homesteader who had been suffering from heart trouble. Muller came upon the body of the old man lying in the stable. He had been dead, alone there, for two days.

But Sodom and Gomorrah plodded along soberly enough on the snowy day when Muller visited the Murker farm. Their uncanny senses must have served them there, too, for the doctor was in no great hurry to encounter Lucian Dorrit in the home of his wife. With all his insistence on the grim comedy of life, Muller experienced nothing but heaviness of heart every time he thought of the marriage of Lucian and Hattie. The gossip in Loyola only embittered him.

He did not know why he had planned another kind of life for Luce Dorrit. He did not know why he should still cling so desperately to the hope that somehow the heartless comedy would resolve itself happily even yet, and that the last curtain should not go down on the tragedy of futile dreams. Perhaps it was because he could not forget the image of Lucian Dorrit hurrying through the raw cold of a winter twilight, his boy face shining and eager, to spend an hour with Mr. Tingley, who had undertaken to prepare him for his high-school diploma. Perhaps it was because of the memories he cherished of long talks he had had when the boy had come to his office to borrow a book to read in the winter evenings. Or it may have been simply the fact that Muller, conscious that life for him had come to a standstill,

found agreeable compensation in hoping greatly for another's achievement.

Whatever it was, the old doctor had never reconciled himself to the fate that had befallen Lucian Dorrit. But these were thoughts that he never shared with anyone in Loyola.

Ho-hum! Here was Hattie Murker's farm at last. Muller was never to call her anything but Hattie *Murker*, in his own mind. He derived a perverse and naive satisfaction from denying her her new and lawful appellation.

He drove through the open gateway and up the narrow slope to the house. There was Bert now, a pail in either hand, trudging heavily down the pathway toward the barns. He turned at the sound of Muller's approach and lifted one hand, bucket and all, in a gesture of greeting. The doctor waved his hand and Bert kept on his way to the barns.

When he had tied his team to a post in the yard, Muller climbed to the back porch and knocked at the door. In a moment the door opened and Hattie herself stood before him in a checked all-over apron, her cheeks flushed from baking. She looked Muller straight in the eyes as they shook hands.

"Howdy do, Doctor Muller!" she greeted him, with one of her rare, determined smiles. "Come right in. I've got newspapers on the floor till it dries. Give me your hat and coat. Now, you sit right down there while I take a look at my buns."

As Muller took the chair she indicated he had the sen-

sation of being swept along on a wave. He recalled the time when old John Murker was dying. It had been in the midst of spring sowing and Hattie had not permitted the work on the farm to lapse for a moment. When John Murker had breathed his last, there had been no lack of dignified grief on Hattie's part, but beneath that grief Muller had sensed in her an unflagging ambition to carry on the work of the farm, an ambition that was strong almost to ruthlessness. Even on the day of the funeral two men were plowing in the northwest quarter. "Father would have wanted it so," Hattie had said, and that was probably true.

Muller watched Hattie as she knelt before the oven to look at her buns. She was certainly a striking-looking woman, he thought, a little bitterly—too striking! He could think back easily to a time in his boyhood when he would have cringed in her presence. He sighed comfortably now in the safety of his years and wisdom.

"Luce is toward the quarry," Hattie was saying. "You'll take a cup of coffee, now, won't you, and he'll be back before you go. He'll be glad to see you, being this is the first time you've come here since we got married."

She dumped the buns out on the table and with swift, deft fingers began to butter their golden brown tops. Hattie had won many first prizes at the county fairs for her bread and buns, Muller remembered.

"They look mighty fine, Hattie," he said admiringly. "Am I going to have one?"

"With honey from my own bees," she replied promptly.

He watched her while she went about preparing cof-

fee and spreading a white cloth at one end of the table, and their talk was of Loyola and the hard winter and the hope of an early spring. She seemed content, in a brisk, resolute sort of way, and yet—Muller's avidity for the truth of things would give him no peace. He had listened to none of the slanderous gossip of Loyola. He shared none of Loyola's prurient curiosity. But he could not help wondering how it had all come about.

"Married life seems to be agreeing with you, Hattie," he observed mildly. "I never saw you look so pretty."

Hattie looked pleased, in a guarded way. She had never quite trusted Muller, with his half-smiling, quizzical eyes. For all his professional ability, he must be rather a fool to be always smiling to himself when, for the life of her, she could see nothing whatever to smile about.

"Sit in, now, and have a bite," she urged, taking the pot of coffee from the stove. "I always have a cup myself this time of day. Luce comes in if he isn't too far from the house. He ought to be in now, any minute."

Muller sat down to the steaming coffee and Hattie went to the window to look out.

"I don't see any sign of him yet, but he'll be along," she said and returned to the table.

Muller took a sip of coffee and settled back in his chair, his faint smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

"You certainly surprised us all, the two of you," he began. "Nobody guessed what was up till it was all over. You might have given us a chance to buy a wedding present, at least, Hattie."

In spite of his smile, there was something quietly accusing in the tone of his voice. Nor was his manner lost upon Hattie. She felt, quickly, that he was in some vague way accusing her personally. A sharp flame of resentment kindled within her. She set down her cup and fixed her eyes squarely upon Muller.

"Yes—it was sudden," she said. "We didn't know about it ourselves until one night Luce came here to see me. But there are some people in the world, Doctor Muller, who can make up their minds. I might 'a' married someone older than Luce—and steadier—but he's a good boy and he's strong and healthy and I know I can make something out of him—and that's more than can be said for most of the men I've seen round Loyola. He'll help me make this farm what it ought to be—and what father wanted it to be—a place that we'll both be proud to hand on when we're too old to look after it ourselves."

She had been talking very fast. Her voice stopped abruptly and her eyes moved to the window. Muller fancied that she saw from it the limitless extent of her ambition. He moved a little uneasily in his chair and his eyes narrowed as he leaned forward and regarded her for a moment silently.

"You'll probably do all that, the two of you," he said quietly. "And you'll probably raise a healthy family to take it over when you give it up, too. Only—I have wondered a little about it all, Hattie. I——"

Her manner became suddenly belligerent.

"I know what you have been wondering," she broke

forth. "And I know what the whole crowd in Loyola has been wondering, too. But I don't care what they think. Every woman has a right to a home. She has a right to a man and—and children. And a woman has got to take her chance when it comes to her. It wasn't my fault that I didn't marry Ben Torson. But they all acted like it was. For a year they've been talking behind my back about that. I don't care. I wanted children to grow up and have this land after me. I wanted to have something to look forward to in the future. I had a right to want it. And when Luce Dorrit came to me, I took him. That's the truth and I don't care who knows it!"

Muller's eyes fell to the floor. There was something in Hattie's presence that he could not meet with equanimity, try as he might. He had seen it in women before, that uprising of the primitive that brooks no opposition and listens to no argument.

There was a sound of footsteps on the porch and Hattie got to her feet to go to the door.

"That's Luce now," she said.

She opened the door and Lucian came in, drawing off his buckskin mitts, and advanced to shake hands with Muller. The doctor did not fail to notice the blush that leaped to his cheeks, or the suddenly confused look of his eyes.

"Good Lord, he's only a boy still!" Muller thought to himself with dismay.

"Hello, Muller!" Lucian cried out with a grin. "How's the doc, eh? Pretty near time you were showing up.

I've been too busy to call on you—and too healthy. But Hattie can tell you how often I've talked about you—eh, Hattie?"

Hattie smiled as Lucian came to her and threw his arm about her waist.

"And how do you think my wife is looking, doc?" he asked heartily. "Fine, eh? And the best darned cook in the country, if I do say it myself!"

"I'll swear to that, Luce," Muller assented and he meant what he said.

Hattie disengaged herself with a slight smile and went to the stove for the coffee-pot. Luce drew a chair to the table and sat down beside Muller.

Lucian joked about the suddenness of his marriage and the shock it must have been to the people in Loyola who always knew of a coming event, be it a birth, a death or a marriage, ages before its arrival.

When the time came for Muller to leave, Lucian went out with him, untied his horses and led them to the trough which had frozen over and had to be cut through. While Lucian pumped fresh water Muller looked at him closely. Now that he had shed his defense of good humor the fate that had befallen him showed itself clearly in his face. Muller, characteristically, thought that he looked like a man who had survived a great illness at the cost of a tremendous struggle. There had been a time when Muller could have spoken to him and offered, somehow, to help. That day had passed. The relentless, pitiless force that directs the life of every human being had taken hold of Lucian Dorrit. All that was left now for Doc-

tor Muller was to sit by and idly watch; protestingly, perhaps, but idly.

He shook hands with Lucian, a little more vigorously, probably, than he had an hour or so before. His eyes, with the left brow lifted, squinted a little more than usual as he slapped Lucian on the shoulder.

"Take care of yourself these raw days," he warned and got into his cutter.

He drove away feeling rather fatuous and old.

CHAPTER IV

Those months of the first winter of his marriage were to Lucian Dorrit a grotesque unreality. He moved in a fantastic dream. The dream, rather, moved about him. He looked at Hattie and saw her going about her daily tasks in a world that had all the outward appearances of reality but none of the inner substance of it. Her complacent acceptance of everything, including Lucian himself, her unwavering devotion to a routine that had swept him up and carried him along without a moment's pause for readjustment, convinced him at times that his existence with Hattie had been an hallucination from the very first, that something in his brain had snapped on that memorable night of snow and white moonlight. Try as he would, he could think of her only as one of the "older girls" at school, rather forbidding, friendly in a distant, lofty way, remote. Sometimes in the depth of night he would awaken, bewildered, beside Hattie, wonder where he was and what had happened to him, and lie awake for hours trying to understand.

However bold may have been the front he presented to the little world in which he lived, he was none the less sensitive to its thoughtless ridicule. In many ways the attitude of the people in Loyola became clear to him. There were days when his arrival in town brought little boys darting into the street to shout things after him,

execrable things they had heard, doubtless, from their elders and had translated into their own peculiarly vivid, gross, small-boy language. He had come to fear, too, the faces that would press close to the frozen windows as he passed along the street and vanish suddenly as he turned to look at them.

He cursed himself for his own sensitiveness, but found no means to cure it. The world's most bitter thorn, the moral censure of little lives, had set deep into the soul of Lucian Dorrit.

For all his suffering, however, the people of Loyola had no inkling of the paralysis that had seized his spirit. Nonplussed by his buoyant air, they would crane their necks to watch him as he swung down the street, his broad shoulders still moving with their unconscious slight sway in the leather, fleece-lined jacket everyone knew Hattie had bought for him; they would watch him again as he drove out of town, standing straight and arrogant in the new green sleigh that Hattie had also bought, behind the two deep-chested dappled grays, flicking the whip now and then in a wide, graceful circle to their ears. They might watch as they pleased, but they would see nothing crushed about Luce Dorrit, nothing humbled in that straight blue eye of his, as there should have been.

On each return from Loyola on those cold winter evenings, with an unspeakable bitterness gnawing at his thoughts, he almost welcomed the warm physical intoxication which Hattie brought to him. She would meet him at the door, her shadow sprawling on the white wall behind her, the lamp on the table making bold angles of

warm yellow and grayish violet on the sloping ceiling. Hattie's shoulders would be square and stiff, her neck a white rigidity above the plain gingham of her dress, her eyes smoldering, sullen and warm.

She was a deep mystery to Lucian. From the first he had known vaguely that his emotion toward her was not love. She was a sensation in which he had drowned all other thought and feeling. She was something new, delicious, strange, bounteous. He was humbled even in the moment that he was stirred by her presence. She was unapproachable in her dignity even when the rigid set of her shoulders was a deliberate challenge to him. She was a remarkable woman and his indignation rose at the thought of the mean souls who pretended to hold her in contempt.

It was on evenings when Bert remained at home instead of going to Loyola or to some neighboring homestead, that Hattie's charm over Lucian failed of its wonted power. As far back as he could remember, Lucian had had a horror of the slothful, splay creature who was neither boy nor man, whose hands hung inert before him, dangling from his wrists, whose head was always a little to one side in the abstracted attitude of listening, and whose intelligence was far more clear than he would admit.

Bert was possessed of certain oddments of skill, but he had a genius for putting them to uses that were altogether grotesque and often horrible. Once when Lucian was a boy and Bert was already a man grown, the latter had done a thing that had filled Lucian with un-

forgettable loathing. He had been sent to the Murker farm on an errand and had found Bert beating with a pitch-fork against the flat side of an old straw stack, half of which had been cut away with a hay-knife. In one hand he held an iron bar with which he struck the heads of snakes as they darted out innumerably from the side of the stack. Bert had hung the half dead reptiles across a fence and taking his rifle had shot off in quick succession the head of every one of them. Lucian had run all the way home, white with nausea.

Lucian was grateful for the heavy work on the Murker place, work that used the body of a man ruthlessly from colorless icy dawn until long after darkness had come down. There was twice as much livestock on the Murker farm as there had ever been on the Dorrit place, but Hattie and her brother had managed during the winters without hired help. Now most of the work fell upon Lucian's shoulders. For no apparent reason, Bert's capabilities, to say nothing of his interest, seemed completely to have failed since Lucian's coming. But work brought sleep, and sleep a sort of forgetfulness.

As spring approached, Hattie spoke of wider interests which became her new station in life. There were the doings of the school board and the Woman's Auxiliary and the Christian Endeavor Society and the municipal council. As a married woman and as a land-owner of some prominence in the district she was not going to permit her neighbors to lose sight of the fact that she had rights that must be respected. There were positions of honor, moreover, to which she might aspire and for which she felt

herself adequately qualified. Nor did she turn her eyes to wider fields because she felt any sense of insecurity in her own. She was content with Lucian, and never questioned Lucian's contentment in his life with her. As the weeks wore on, she affected, by a dexterous taking of their joint life for granted, the comfortable monotony with which she believed all happy marriages were blessed.

There were moments, however, when a certain lack of instinctive confidence in her position had to be met with a fierce resoluteness. Such moments were inevitably followed by periods of speculative indulgence toward Lucian. She would look at him in the lamplight with half-closed eyes, and in her deep, measured voice would suggest something for his comfort, his pleasure, which she was so able to give him. Already she had secretly come to hate his love of reading, but she urged him, nevertheless, to send to the city for books which Lucian had never been able to afford. She had even gone so far as to suggest that he should take a couple of weeks off in the early summer and join Muller on his annual fishing trip to the lakes in the north. She spared no pains to convince him that he was free as he had never been in his life before —and all the while she was slowly, inexorably possessing him.

It was a simple thing that first brought to Lucian a realization of his complete compromise. March had come in with a week of warm days and nights that had wasted the snow and started the water running over the winter ice in the creeks. It had turned suddenly cold then, so that the sloughs had given themselves a fresh covering

of glare-ice. On a cold night toward the middle of the month, Lucian sat with Hattie and Bert about the kitchen table. Lucian was reading a book and Hattie, busy with a bit of crocheting, glanced toward the open pages with a fine frown knitting her brows. Bert was busy fashioning a new gopher trap out of a small box and pieces of string.

"I think I'll build onto the house in a year or so, Luce," Hattie announced quietly. "We'll be needing more room here soon."

Lucian continued to stare at the print before him, although he did not see it. Hattie's tone had sent through him a spasm of uneasiness.

"Why more?" he asked, not knowing what else to say and not wishing to betray his annoyance.

Hattie looked up at him, level-eyed, her smoothly parted hair calm above her brow. Lucian felt that look and raised his eyes. He had a fleeting glimpse of her then as she really was—quiet, inflexible, unbending, serene in her acceptance of him into her life. And with that glimpse of the power that was in her, Lucian felt a shock of fear that amounted almost to panic.

"I think, Luce, we would do well to begin now planning for the future," she said evenly as she took up her work again. "There will be children, let us hope, and when they come there'll be less time for making plans. Anyhow, with you helping me, we'll be able to afford a bigger house."

A silly tattoo seemed to be beating in Lucian's brain. There was something that he ought to tell Hattie, some-

thing he ought to explain to her—that he was an imposter here—that her children . . . It was ridiculous . . . Hattie Murker, one of the older girls at school . . .

Why could he not tell her what was in his mind? Why must he be always reminding himself that he alone was responsible for it all and that he had to go through with it now like a man?

"I'll do everything I can to help you, Hattie," he said lamely, "though that isn't much, Lord knows!"

She lifted her eyes with the stolid, impenetrable look he had sometimes seen in them, and sat for a moment staring at the wall. That look was a chilling, mysterious thing to Lucian.

"You have already done more than you have any idea of," she told him enigmatically.

"What do you mean, Hattie?" he asked.

She smiled at him suddenly. Hattie was almost pretty when she smiled. "There are some things, Luce, you will never understand," she said with a laugh that was half sigh.

At such moments she seemed much more than four years older than Lucian. Already she had shown him how a word from her could make him feel puerile, ineffectual. And yet she was laying vast, slow plans, weaving their lives together indistinguishably. As he sat there motionless, pretending to read in front of Hattie, she seemed to grow to a terrifying height, overpowering him. He thought suddenly of his mother and of how he had wanted to run away from her when he was very small.

The leaves of his book, as he tried to turn them casually, rattled crisply against the silence.

All at once Hattie was speaking again.

"I like the feel of building going on, Luce. It makes you feel healthy and strong yourself—and successful, like. I always think there's a difference between just sitting around and thinking about things and getting out and doing them. When you think too much you don't do enough. And when you do things you can't help feeling that you can do more and more. I like the good, strong, healthy feeling it gives you."

"As though—as though there ain't a thing you can't get—if you really want it, eh, Hattie?" Bert suddenly broke in.

There had been a strange intensity in Hattie's words which Lucian, even in his abstraction, did not fail to notice. But Bert's remark repelled him with its hint of something shadowy and terrible.

Hattie stood up just then, her shoulders very erect, and looked down at Lucian for a moment before putting away her work for the night. It was that hard, invincible line of her shoulders that had tormented Lucian first, that had made him want to possess her. He knew now, with sudden, startling, cruel certainty, that he had never possessed her, that it had been but a false moment of excitement, and that she would never be possessed by anyone, much less by him. As he looked at her he felt helplessly young, inexpressibly callow and unfit. If there were only someone to whom he might go, with whom he might talk for

an hour! Perhaps Mons Torson would be coming back soon. Or perhaps he might go down and see his brothers if it did not storm before another night.

"Haven't you done enough reading for one night?"

It was Hattie's voice again. Lucian closed his book quietly and got up from his chair. For the past hour he had not read a word.

The next night was clear with a rising wind that promised more snow. That day Lucian had walked a short distance along the shallow creek that ran southward through the farm, on past the Dorrit place, and joined Lost River miles beyond Loyola. The soft weather had spread its surface with water from the fields and it was now a gleaming ribbon of new ice. As a boy, Lucian had sped on his skates up and down the tortuous course of that creek—someone had named it Cedar River—had journeyed south beyond Loyola with his brothers, and had explored its banks northward as far as the nearest bushland, some five miles away, with all the thrills of rare adventure attending him. During the first month of his life with Hattie, he had donned his skates and proven to himself that he had not lost the knack of it yet although there had been too much snow to permit of his going far from home. Now he felt the old urge within him again as he stood on the bank of the creek and let his eye rove over the gleaming surface.

When he had finished his supper, he got his skates out with almost boyish glee and told Hattie he was going down the river to see his brothers.

"I'm afraid we're going to have snow soon, Luce," she said gently, patting him into his leather jacket. "You'd better try and be back early."

From his place in the corner near the kitchen stove, Bert, for some perverse reason of his own, giggled audibly. Luce reddened with anger. Bert never lost an opportunity to laugh at him in his idiotic, knowing way.

"Don't worry, Hattie," he said stoutly. "I'll not stay late."

He crossed a field below the barns and pushed his way through the gray fretwork of winter brush to the river bank. There he sat down and put on his skates with a feeling of eagerness that he had thought was lost to him now. His feet were long and ungainly and a little boyish still. The ankles had not set into their full strength as they were to do in the years to come, in the good years of the labor of the body as well as of the soul.

Lucian was a long, light skater, dipping and swerving with undiminishing speed at the curves of the river. He skated low, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his head well forward and taking the wind with zest for its penetrating chill. His skates rang over the dark surface of the ice and here and there left a tiny white drift where the blade had cleaved and turned the ice to powder. A boy skating with long, clean, untrammeled limbs in the fierce air, was Luce Dorrit. Here was solitude, and power again, the power that comes in the solitude of a boy. And in the straggling willows on the river bank a small wind nickered, an elfin spectator, droll, unhuman, cruel.

From the river he saw the light in the window of his mother's kitchen. They would probably be sitting down to supper now, since they were in the habit of eating late, after all the work was done for the night.

He took off his skates and started up the path past the barn. His sister Leona had been out getting water and was replacing the gunny-sack about the pump to keep it from freezing, when Lucian hailed her.

"Oh, Luce!" she burst out joyfully and set her pail down to rush upon him. He caught her up from the ground and held her for a moment in his arms. "Gee, I've been lonesome, Luce! I'm so glad you've come. Can you stay all night?"

Luce had set her on her feet again and had picked up the pail of water and started for the house. "All night! Do you think a married man can run off whenever he likes and not come back till morning? Or have you forgotten that I'm married?" He laughed and pinched her ear. "It *ain't* done, Leone. But I'll stay long enough to give you a game of 'galloping,' if you like."

"Galloping Devil" was a ridiculous, hysterical card game which Leona—and Luce, too, for that matter—adored.

"Oh, goody! Carrie Strand is here. She's going to stay all night with me."

"Great!" Lucian exclaimed. "We'll make a real party of it."

"Her pa had to go to Lost River to-day and he won't be back till to-morrow. Gee, Luce, but she's smart. You ought to see her draw now. She can draw just anything.

She's been practicin' a lot lately and she says she's goin' down to some school in the city where they teach you to draw, just as soon as her pa lets her go."

They were at the door now and Leona burst in with the announcement that Luce had come. The kitchen table was set with its red checked cloth, and the stove was steaming with hot, odorous food. Agatha Dorrit stood over the fire, her high cheek-bones red from the heat, her hair pulled back severely from her ears and brow. As far back as Lucian could remember, his mother had always borne an air of injury when she was cooking, as though she were being put upon by her family in this task of supplying nourishment for them. When he entered now, she drew back her chin and regarded him appraisingly, her wrists crossed below her flat bosom, a large spoon suspended in one hand.

"Well—and you *did* come!" she said, with her slightly grieved air.

Her eyes held him piercingly. As of old, Lucian's sense of guilt in his mother's presence came upon him. Hating himself for the feeling, he threw his skates down noisily on the floor and hung his cap on a nail.

"Let out for the evening," he returned to her greeting.

He laughed as he spoke, but he did not fail to catch the looks that were exchanged between his brothers as he turned toward them seated at the table.

"Hello, kids!" he called to them. "Hello, Carrie! I didn't expect to find you here."

Karen Strand was seated between Manlius and Arnold at the table.

"She didn't expect to find you, either, or she wouldn't 'a' come—eh, Carrie?" Manlius put in.

She smiled and looked up at Lucian with her large, dark-fringed eyes. "Oh, he's married now, so it doesn't matter," she countered.

"Well, sit in and have a cup o' tea with us," Agatha Dorrit invited.

Lucian drew a chair to the table and sat down opposite his brothers with Leona beside him.

"And how is Hattie?" Mrs. Dorrit asked. "She can't be wonderin' much about me, for all she's seen o' me since the winter set in."

Lucian hastened to explain that Hattie had gone out very little during the cold weather, invented a dozen reasons for her failure to visit his mother, and did his best to placate her mood and make her more agreeable. It seemed to Lucian that he had always been doing something of the kind when he and his mother had been together.

"And do you like your wife—a great deal?" Karen asked abruptly when he had done what he could with his mother.

Manlius and Arnold burst into laughter. Karen seemed unaware of their amusement. She sat coolly detached, one small hand cupping her chin.

"He dassen't do anything but," Arney put in, and received a kick in the shin from Manlius.

Lucian laughed almost as if he enjoyed the brotherly gibe. Then he turned the conversation into safer channels, asked them about their work and how the livestock was faring and how far they had progressed with their

preparations for the spring seeding. Immediately after his marriage to Hattie, Lucian had deeded over to his two brothers all the rights he had fallen heir to on his father's death—all except the title to a small stretch of stony, inarable ground that lay along the southern boundary of the Murker farm. This strip of land, for some obscure reason, William Dorrit had loved, although it had lain fallow for years and had eaten up all the seed that had ever been put into it without yielding enough to pay for the harvesting of it. The Dorrit boys would have no use for the ground since it was in an awkward position for grazing purposes and Lucian had retained it in his own name. Neither Manlius nor Arnold had protested. Agatha Dorrit had sighed heavily and dropped a few tears—she could be very sentimental at times, for all her lack of understanding. Hattie had been frankly amused.

The table was no sooner cleared of the supper dishes than Lucian and the two girls sat in to the promised game of "Galloping Devil." For an hour then there was much hilarious laughter and feigned venom, Lucian making a great show of malice toward his nimble-fingered and quick-witted opponents. There was no pretense, however, in the mood in which the girls presently received Lucian's abrupt announcement that it was time for him to go. He yielded to the extent of playing "just one more round," then hurriedly took his cap and coat from the wall and picked up his skates.

Leona threw a shawl about her shoulders. "I'm going to walk down as far as the creek with you, anyhow, Luce," she said. "Come on, Carrie!"

Karen's eyes shone and she hurried for her hat and coat. Lucian's mother stood in the doorway as they went out, her hands folded in her apron, and called good-by. As he turned to wave his hand to her, Lucian heard her sentimental sniff, and hurried away.

"Why does Ma do that—every time I come down?" Luce asked his sister impatiently as they moved down the dark path. "It doesn't mean a darned thing—and never has."

"Well—that's Ma," Leona sighed.

They walked in silence through the gray darkness with its ragged fringe of black where the brush hid the river. The girls went out on the ice to slide while Lucian sat down on the bank to put on his skates. When he was ready, he got to his feet and skated out upon the ice.

"Come on, Spingle," he called. "Take a turn with me before I go."

He stretched out his hands to Karen and she took them eagerly. He caught her up into the air and waltzed with her on the ice, to her breathless delight. When he had cut a number of fancy figures, he carried her back to the shore and set her down. While she clung to him still he kissed her upturned face and was suddenly startled at the soft warmth of her lips.

"Whew!" he cried as he straightened up and drew back. "You're getting almost too heavy for me, Spingle. First thing I know you'll be growing up."

He was not thinking much just then of the words he was uttering. He was thinking that he must never again kiss Karen Strand.

At that moment, it happened that Doctor Muller was relaxing mentally after a dinner he had eaten at the table of Mr. Tingley, the principal of the school in Loyola. The dinner had been good, and Muller, sprawled in a comfortable chair in Tingley's study, was quite capable of carrying on what his host fondly thought was brilliant conversation and still have ample energy for all the requirements of good digestion. Loyola mistrusted the soul of Doctor Muller even while it admitted that it could not get on without his mind. But Mr. Tingley, who smilingly patronized what he elected to call "the yokelry" and never ceased to yearn for companionship with a "kindred spirit," rarely lost an opportunity to pay his respects to Muller's intellect, protesting the while that men of superior mental attainments must be forgiven much that could not be condoned in others. Not that Mr. Tingley asked indulgence for anything outwardly irregular in his own life. He was the tender husband of a nervous little woman whose timidity in the presence of strangers was more than compensated for by her intrepid behavior in private.

The two men were alone with their after-dinner cigars.

"I see Mons Torson has come back from the camps," Mr. Tingley remarked idly. "I met him on the street this afternoon."

"Strange fellow, Torson," Muller observed.

"Very," Tingley agreed. "Not much like his brother. Ben was a pretty steady sort." He glanced through the doorway to assure himself that Mrs. Tingley was well out of hearing. "By the way, Muller," he went on, "I've

never had a chance to ask you what you thought of this marriage of young Luce Dorrit and Hattie Murker. Isn't there something preposterous about it—even in this exceedingly preposterous little corner of the world?"

He pronounced the adjective with great stress and sibilation.

"What?" Muller grunted. His tone was as nearly impatient as was becoming in a guest.

"Well—you know—ah—even here where life is likely to be a little—a little careless, shall we say?—even here we look for—for—well, for——"

"Congruity," Muller supplied.

"Exactly. A little appropriateness—especially in a serious business like getting married. You know, I find it hard to reconcile myself to the fact that Luce Dorrit—you remember he showed promise in his high-school work—that he should have married the Murker woman. Dorrit was a presentable chap—handsome, too, as these country boys go—and he had a really quite unusual mind. I'd looked for big things from Luce—yes, indeed, I had."

Mr. Tingley's voice had dropped into a musing tone which he fancied created for his listener an atmosphere of mellowness, studied thoughtfulness, quality. Muller's shoulders had slumped gradually, his head had fallen forward upon his chest, his eyes were on the floor.

"My experience, Tingley," he observed in his husky, almost guttural but not unpleasant voice, "is that there is a large element of the incongruous in all marriages. We happen to see it in this one because it was somewhat picturesque as well as incongruous. The devil of it is,

the experience of most young men who marry is, in a lesser or greater degree, identical with that of Luce Dorrit. The noose that hangs them is chivalry."

Tingley twitched a little and glanced toward the door once more to make sure that his wife was not within hearing. Then he leaned forward in his chair and spoke in a cautious tone.

"Don't you think you're on thin ice there, Muller?" he asked.

The doctor cleared his throat drily, crossed one knee over the other, and knocked the ash from his cigar.

"Young Luce Dorrit has done wrong to no one but himself," he said, disregarding the question his host had put to him. "The shame of it is that he'll have to grow up before he finds that out. Ninety-nine out of every hundred young men of Luce Dorrit's age are pathetic fools, idealists. That strain of idealism was stronger in Luce than it is in most men, too. His father before him had it—never got over it. Somehow life would have got Luce Dorrit. It happens that it got him by means of a woman, but that was largely accidental—except that it gets most of us by the same means. But somewhere in the cursed scheme of things, something—or somebody—side-stepped, shirked, fell down, and the burden of honor rests upon Luce Dorrit's shoulders. It happens all the time, Tingley, in Loyola—in London—in Hindustan. One of two things happens to the victim. Either he fights back and emerges in control of himself and of the world about him —or he goes under—sneaks away into the outback of existence—loses himself in the welter of little lives—grows

too indifferent, even, to die—drinks himself into oblivion —wallows. . . ."

The doctor's voice sank almost to a whisper. It was not flattering to Mr. Tingley, this realization that his guest was actually communing with himself. The principal shifted, tapped with his middle finger upon the arm of his chair, thought, uncomfortably, that it was always a hazardous thing to invite Muller to dinner in one's home.

But Muller sensed nothing of his host's embarrassment. He drew himself up suddenly in his chair and laughed aloud.

"Tingley," he said, "God's a funny old man!"

Lucian, his leather jacket buttoned closely about his throat, was speeding homeward over the ice, the darkness on the river folding him in. The night had become more bitter, and fine snow particles were filling the air. The keen wisps of wind nipped at his cheeks and snatched away the warmth of his blood. In the dry willows on the shore moved a sound as bleak as death. Beyond the banks of the stream the prairie stretched, a baleful, grayish glimmer, immeasurably cold.

When he sat down at last to take off his skates, an unnatural weariness seemed to creep over him. The thought occurred to him that it would be very easy to lean back against the snow-bank and fall asleep. A few snow flurries slanted down out of the air and swept his face. The storm he had expected was coming. By morning, if he lay back in the snow, he would have become a part of the

drift. Slowly he removed his skates and got to his feet. He took the narrow trail up past the barns to where it joined the road that led westward to the main highway. There he paused suddenly. A great wavering bulk was emerging from the shadows before him.

A low exclamation brought Lucian to a halt.

"Is that you, Mons?" he called.

"Yes," came the reply.

They drew close together and Lucian groped for words to say to this friend of his. He was filled with an incomprehensible, painful excitement. It was Mons Torson who spoke first, in a thick voice charged with emotion.

"You didn't expect to meet me here, eh?"

"I was thinking of you just—just to-night, Mons. I didn't know you were back from the camps."

Mons laughed with an ugly, rasping noise in his throat. "No one knows what Mons Torson will do," he said. "He doesn't know himself. I came back because I had to come back. I went away because I didn't have the guts to stay and face it out, that's what. I came back when I couldn't stand it any longer."

He paused and Lucian moved a step closer to him.

"What's wrong, Mons?" he asked.

Torson's laugh was not pleasant. "Wrong? Why, Luce—oh, you damned kid! Go up to the house there and ask her what's wrong. She ought to know now—if she didn't know before. She ought to know—because I told her. I told her to her face—I damned her for what she is—right to her face, I did. Then I walked out and left her—left her standing there—against that white wall

of hers—as if she was nailed to a cross. Go and ask her about it. Ask her why she cursed me to hell. Luce —for Christ's sake, Luce——"

As though the wind had suddenly whisked the breath from his throat, Torson's voice broke, stopped. Luce stood for several seconds looking at him, muttering something so low that Torson barely heard it.

"Get out of the way—out of the way. I've had enough from you—from everybody. Enough. There are some things that are my own—not for you or anyone else to meddle with. My own, do you hear? Get away—now!" He leaned toward Mons Torson, swayed, his control ebbing. "Get away, I'm telling you!" he cried.

With a groan Mons moved a little to one side, his head bowed forward on his chest, and started down the road like a man trying to escape from himself.

There was no light in the house when Lucian entered the yard. His effort to control himself with Mons Torson had left him sick, distraught, undone. Over and over again he told himself that here, at last, was the final test. He must play up now, or accept defeat. He halted before the door. He could not go in just yet. Hattie would be awake still and would know that he had met Torson. Once, twice, three times he walked around the house, struggling to quiet the pounding in his brain.

He let himself in at last, very quietly, and took off his shoes so as not to disturb Hattie. He tiptoed across the floor to the foot of the stairs and stood listening for a moment. No sound came from above.

Carefully he felt his way up and along the hall to his

and Hattie's room. He stole softly to the side of the bed and looked down at her hair showing darkly against the pillow. An impulse of pitying tenderness moved him to put out a hand and touch it lightly. He drew back with a start. The hair and the pillow beneath it were wet. She had been crying. There was something strange about that. He had thought Hattie too strong, too proud to be so moved even by Mons Torson. A disquieting sense of mystery settled upon him, a feeling too vague for scrutiny. As he started to undress he listened for a moment to Hattie's breathing. It came lightly, regularly; but it was not the breathing of one asleep. Lucian stared into the darkness and felt the oppressive beating of his own heart.

Well, she would tell him all about it in her own good time.

The next morning Hattie was out of bed at her usual early hour. At breakfast she was in her best humor.

"I'll be needing some things at Loyola to-day, Luce," she said while they were seated at the table. "Will you take me down in the cutter?"

"Sure, I'll take you down, Hattie," he replied. "I was thinking we'd better make a trip in before the roads get too bad again. Looks like a three-days blow the way it's coming on."

It was while she was dressing to go to Loyola, an act of which Hattie always made something of a ceremony, that she first mentioned Mons Torson to Lucian. He had come up-stairs at her call.

"Mons Torson was here last night, Luce," she said coolly.

"He's back, then," Luce said non-committally.

She did not reply at once. She spent a moment or two adjusting her hat before her mirror. Then she turned to him calmly, neatly clad in her tight-fitting black suit and the stiff little hat that showed her rather large, well-formed ears.

"Luce," she said, "I don't ask you to do much for me that you don't want to do. But from this time on you'll have nothing whatever to do with Mons Torson."

She was drawing on her gloves and as she finished speaking she fastened them at the wrists with two sharp snaps. Lucian had seated himself on the edge of the bed and looked up at her awkwardly. She seemed suddenly to have grown taller. He thought, irrelevantly, that it would be a great joke to go up to her now and push her hat back off her head, pull her clothing awry, tousle her smooth hair. And then reality came back, frightening him.

"Why, Hattie?" he asked her.

"He was here while you were away last night," she told him again and Lucian thought he saw her tremble slightly as she spoke. "He said things to me that nobody has ever said—things nobody ever will say and——"

Lucian got up and stood before her. She had snatched up her handkerchief and was doing her best to stifle a broken sob. Lucian patted her shoulder clumsily.

"Tell me what he said, Hattie."

Her fingers closed tightly about his arm. Almost at once she was herself again.

"We'll say no more about it," she said.

"You don't have to," Lucian told her, his anger rising now as he thought of his meeting with Torson the night before. "I know damned well what he would say. What he expected of me—and how I'd let a woman turn my head—and how you'd got me into this because I wasn't old enough to know my own mind. Don't I know what he'd say? I know what he thinks. But what is all that to us? What's Mons Torson in our lives, Hattie?"

"Nothing, dear, nothing. I didn't mean to say anything about it. Only, I don't want him around here and I don't want you going over there to see him. I intended to tell you that when we got on the road. I'm just all upset this morning, Luce. I called you up-stairs to tell you something else. Luce, dear, I think we're going to have a baby."

There was a ringing in Lucian's ears as of a wind along a hundred fine wires. Waves of heat seemed to rush up over his body. He realized that his arms were slipping away from Hattie's shoulders. He tightened them about her suddenly. Now was the time for a man to play up.

"Are you sure?" he asked her.

"I've known it for some time," she told him.

He looked hard at her. She was a stranger to him. No, she was one of the older girls at school. It was he who was the stranger. Even so, he must say something.

"I'm glad it's going to be," he said in a voice that seemed to come from a great distance.

He felt unspeakably false and weak. Over Hattie's shoulder he saw his own face in the dresser mirror, saw his hounded, miserable eyes and his dejected mouth, and it came to him with a shock that Hattie must see these things, too. He drew himself up stoutly. She must not see him as he saw himself. Their lives must be one from now on. Those dreams of his that belonged to the spacious prairie days of Indian summer must be forever behind him. They were the idle dreams of a boy.

While Hattie crouched against his shoulder, his eyes roamed to the window, and beyond it to the white, hollow land stretching away to the west where the gray horizon seamed it to a nearly colorless sky. There in the spring the rains would brood over the torn and somber earth, there would be the hot ache of growth under the sun; the fulfilment, under the warm wind, of the soil's winter dreams.

Lucian closed his eyes from a sudden dizziness that crowded his heart. William Dorrit had sworn his allegiance to the soil—the soil that had had the power to break his body though it had never utterly possessed his spirit. Like his father, Lucian Dorrit responded to the mystic strength of it, was thrilled by its vast, cruel drama, was challenged to pit his own will against it.

With a mingling of fear and elation, Lucian felt the far horizon closing in upon him as he stood there in the tight room that inscribed his own life with Hattie's, stood there tall and young, and still a little unmanageable in his limbs, and his wife, Hattie, clinging in his arms.

In the years to come he was to be the sower and the reaper of an obscure harvest in those fields.

CHAPTER V

The dull, foggy heat that sometimes strikes the northern prairies toward the end of September hung over the field just south of the large Murker barn, where the threshing machine spewed out its yellow torrent of chaff, and the crew, pausing now and then in their hurried labors, mopped the dust from their red, smarting brows.

Luce Dorrit, pitching down sheaves from the load he had just hauled in from a neighboring field, seemed unmindful of that clinging, prickly air. He was having enough to do to hold his temper. Mert Naley, of Castle's Livery, who was in the threshing crew, had kept his companions in a high pitch of merriment all afternoon. Mert's jokes had not been meant for the ears of Luce Dorrit and the deafening hum of the thresher had done much to keep them where they belonged. They found a ready audience, however, among the younger members of the crew. They shrieked with laughter, slapped their overalled thighs, and removed their slouch-hats to scratch their heads in a final chuckle before they fell to their work again.

Luce had not been wholly unaware of the nature of Mert's humor. Mert, moreover, was trading generously on his knowledge of Luce's tolerant spirit. Had he not been among the first to congratulate Lucian Dorrit on the birth of his son just three days before? When he had

come in with his last load, however, Luce had gone to the house and had returned by way of the east corner of the barn instead of coming straight across the garden. He was only a few yards away from the men when he had caught clearly the words of Mert Naley linking Hattie's name with his own in an unsavory jest. The men had seen Luce coming and had received Mert's joke in dead silence. Mert started to laugh at his own remark, glanced up to see Luce only a few feet away, then fell furiously to work. Lucian, pale under the burnt copper of his skin, had jumped back lightly on the rack and had begun pitching sheaves with all his might.

When he had thrown off his load and had started back once more to the dismantled fields, he could not help wondering what it was that made a man endure insult, embarassment, even abject loneliness. He had thought much about the same question during the past months. In the early spring, when he had driven the seeder over acre after patient acre of Hattie's land, he had often thrown his head back and strained his eyes into the blue depths of the sky as though he had expected to find his answer written there. He had even prayed—yes, intensely and aloud—for strength to live out the life he had brought upon himself and for character to hide his misery from those who would laugh at it if they saw it.

Behind him now, as he prepared to build his last load, a brassy sun was going down in a clear sky. To the north and east rose Blacksnake Hill, the stone-quarry on Hattie's land. Luce, standing on the rack, gazed at the hill, where an age of terrestrial passion had flung up a

ridge scarped and studded by rutilant red and silver bowlders. In that wash of light the rocks were a magnificence of color. They seemed to spray an actual reddish vapor over the swamp which lay below them to the north, and over the fields of Peter Strand to the east.

And then, on the south road of that flat, grassy reach of prairie, Luce saw Muller riding westward in his light buggy, behind his two indolent nags. He was on his way to pay his professional respects to Hattie. There was someone in the seat beside him—Karen Strand, it was. Muller, then, had been over to see the Strands and had brought Karen back with him for a look at the new baby. They were driving very slowly. There would be time enough for Luce to put on his load and drive back with it before they arrived.

When the sun had fallen away behind the horizon, the men left off work and went up to the house, where a hasty washing took place in the basins that Bert had set out for them. Bert did most of the cooking now, and fed the men in the summer kitchen. He took a childish pride in his responsibility and discharged his duties well enough. He was even envious of the "hired girl" whom Hattie had got from Lost River, a girl recommended by Luce's Aunt Ella. Bert and the girl were constantly at daggers drawn and Lucian had frequently found it necessary to settle their disputes in order that Hattie should have the peace and quiet so necessary in her present condition.

Lucian left the house and walked down to the gate as Muller drove up from the roadway. The two men waved

to each other and Lucian noticed that Karen, smiling beside Muller, had her arms full of September wild flowers, reeds and colored leaves.

"Hello, Spingle! Hello, Doctor!" Lucian greeted them as he came out and slapped the great bony flank of Sodom.

"Hello, yourself!" cried Muller. "How's the family?"

"Great! Come on in."

Karen, her eyes twinkling, laughed down at him.

"Hello, you!" she said playfully. She held up her flowers for his inspection. "Look—aren't they lovely? And there isn't one of them for you. Doesn't that make you jealous?"

"Not a darn bit," he assured her, and the face he made at her started her giggles. He lifted her down from the buggy.

"Gosh, Spingle, how you're growing!" he exclaimed. He stepped to one side and eyed her up and down. "But thin—good Lord, Muller, this girl needs a tonic. Cod-liver oil, that's what!"

Karen made a grimace and blushed faintly.

"She'll fill out," Muller said complacently. "Give her time. I can only stay a minute, Luce. I'm going on north as far as the Morrison place. The old lady is bad again. Let's get into the house."

The three started up the path through the gate.

"I'm *crazy* to see the baby," Karen said. "Doctor says it's even homelier than I was and he has always said that I was the homeliest brat he had ever seen. Didn't you?"

"Absolutely," Muller swore. "This one breaks all the records for ugliness in thirty years of practice. But

we're not saying who the kid looks like, eh, Karen, with Luce around?"

They were at the house now and Luce led the way in. When they came to the door of Hattie's room, the spare bedroom down-stairs, Luce stepped back beside Muller and motioned for Karen to enter. Both men noticed the dignity that descended upon Karen as she stepped through the doorway. There was in her body none of that appearance of left-over limbs which is so characteristic of the half-grown girl. She was slender and smooth and quiet, of that peculiar mingling of earnestness and gayety that made one never quite sure of her age. She was unlike most of the other girls of the district who, at fifteen, were already young women, very knowing and ambitious, amazingly mature.

Karen had found little companionship among the girls at school in Loyola. She had lived in a fantastic world of her own, a world unknown to the others, a world where weeds and stones and stars were people. Now she was becoming wistfully aware of the inadequacy of that world and with the change had come the growing conviction that her few friends—her father, Lucian, Leona, Doctor Muller—were somehow not the same as she had once pictured them. For that very reason, she clung almost with desperation to the dream world that was passing and refused to accept the world of reality that was taking shape about her and within her.

Hattie was lying with her face toward the wall.

"Here's Carrie with flowers for you, Hattie," Luce said when they had entered the room.

She turned her head slowly and looked up at the group that stood beside her bed. She seemed to see no one there except Muller.

"Well, Doctor," she greeted him quietly, "I thought you weren't coming to-day, mebbe."

Muller looked down at her, his eyes inscrutable. "I'm a bit late," he said, "but the patient looks all right, eh?"

"I'm all right, I guess," she replied with a long sigh.

"We've brought you some wild flowers," Muller observed quietly.

Hattie turned her eyes toward Karen.

"Is there any goldenrod among them?" she asked faintly. "I can't stand goldenrod. It gives me hayfever."

It had been Karen's chief delight that she had been able to find two or three sprays of goldenrod that had not yet turned to seed. She stepped back quickly from the bed, and in the soft light of the room Lucian saw her eyes, dark and hurt. He took the flowers from her and put them aside, patting Karen's hand understandingly. Then he turned once more to the bed.

"Carrie wants to see the baby, Hattie," he said. "I'll take him into the other room where there's a little more light, while you and the doctor have your visit."

He leaned over and lifted the child from its cradle beside the bed.

"Don't keep him out there long, Luce," Hattie admonished him. "There's always a draught in that other room." Then, as Karen followed Lucian from the room:

"Thanks for the flowers, Carrie. It was nice of you to come over."

In the outer room, Karen admired the baby to her heart's content and was indignant at the description Muller had given of him. She felt duly proud when Luce permitted her to hold the baby in her arms. It was not long before she seemed to have forgotten all about Hattie's offensive manner toward her and was doing her best to find an appropriate fairy-baby name.

"You know," she apologized seriously to Lucian, "I just hate to give up believing in fairies."

"Don't give it up, Spingle," he told her, and his manner was even more serious than her own.

"I'm not going to—not altogether," she replied. "A person has to have *something*."

She was smiling down at the baby as she spoke. Bert burst into the room suddenly, leered at Karen and Luce, and hurried into Hattie's room to light the lamp. There was a look in his face that stirred a loathing in Lucian's heart. Why did the fool have to come in at all?

Karen was downcast when Luce finally took the baby and went back to Hattie's room. Muller was already taking his leave.

"You won't stay for a bite of supper?" Luce invited.

"Have to get along, Luce," Muller told him. "I had a snack at the Strands'. Everything's fine here. You'll have Hattie up and around again before you know it. Don't hurry, that's all. We don't want a relapse."

He laughed heartily and called good-by. Muller was

in fine fettle, it seemed. In the parlor outside Hattie's room, he winked soberly at Karen as he bade her good-by. The friendship of these two was founded upon a whimsical kind of humor that defied analysis. Karen always replied to the doctor's wink by a deep sucking in of her cheeks that made a rose-bud of her lips, and a round widening of her eyes. Behind it all lay, supposedly, a secret and mysterious significance.

When Muller was gone, Luce came out of Hattie's room.

"Amuse yourself with those books under the table there, like a good little girl," he said hastily. "I'm going to have a bite to eat."

"I think I'll run along home, like a good little girl," she suggested drily.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," he said, with mock severity. "You're going to wait till I can go with you."

"I'm not scared to go alone," she said in a curiously abrupt manner that made Luce smile.

"Don't let what I said about your growing up go to your head," he warned her. "Sit down there beside the window. I'll be with you in a minute."

He returned to the bedroom, leaving Karen with a slight frown between her brows and a bright spot of color in either cheek. She sat down on the chair that stood near the window, but she did not take any of the books that lay in a pile under the table. Instead, she sat swinging her slender feet and staring at the ceiling.

In Hattie's room, Bert had drawn the little table close to the bed. The hired girl came in presently with a tray

of food and dishes. During Hattie's confinement, she had insisted on Lucian's eating his supper with her every evening. It gave her an opportunity to question him concerning the day's work on the farm. It preserved for her a sense of unbroken control that was as dear to her as life itself. As she questioned him, a little wearily, Lucian's thoughts were rather upon the tiny creature that lay on the pillow beside Hattie. The incredibility of it all swept over him drowningly. How nonchalantly life recreated itself! And how indifferent it was to the fate of what it created!

Luce had little desire for food, but he ate to please Hattie and to conceal from her his true state of mind. Her eyes rested upon him speculatively and it seemed to him that she must look clear through the sham of his outward cheerfulness. He reviled himself for that insistent spirit of rebellion from which he could not shake himself free. It was unnatural, inhuman. If he were half the man he should be, he told himself over and over again, he would be the happiest soul alive. But where was the use of telling when a man's brain ached under the burden of the bitter truth it bore?

Hattie was to-night in one of the first of those mysterious, ironic moods that were soon to become habitual with her. She said very little and lay regarding Lucian from eyes that were slightly narrowed, her upper lip drawn down firmly over her strong, somewhat prominent teeth. When Luce suggested that he would have to take Karen home, she admitted with a sigh that she supposed he must, since it was dark, but that she wished people would be

more thoughtful and not send their children about the country to make a nuisance of them for the neighbors.

"After all, Hattie," Luce protested mildly, "she came over to bring flowers to you."

"I suppose so," Hattie breathed.

When Lucian left the room and went into the parlor a few minutes later, Karen jumped hastily to her feet.

"I don't think you ought to leave Hattie alone," she said with concern. "I can go home alone, really I can."

Hattie's voice interrupted Lucian's reply.

"You're going now, Carrie?" she called and Karen stepped hesitatingly into the open doorway of the room.

"Yes," she said. "I should have gone before it got dark."

"Thanks for the flowers, then. I'll have Luce put them in a bowl for me."

"I hope you'll be up soon," Karen said. "And I think the baby is a dear."

"Tell Peter I'd be glad to see him when he can get the time to run over."

"He'll be glad to come. Good-by."

"Good-by, Carrie. Luce will see that you get home safe."

Once outside the house, Karen protested again at Luce's accompanying her home.

"Let me go alone, Luce," she pleaded.

Luce strove to give an air of jauntiness to his resolution. "Is that the way a knight treats his lady fair?" he asked, recapturing for the moment the mood of the old

days when they used to walk along the road together in the waning winter twilights.

Karen laughed in spite of herself and they went off in a light humor that improved mightily as they made their way across the fields. It would have been difficult indeed to remain low-spirited on such an evening. The air had cleared at sundown, and the sky with its few stars was pellucid and faintly melancholy. The world about them seemed full of a soft lamenting for another summer gone. The frogs over in the slough below Blacksnake Hill croaked and trilled a thousand trumpet bubbles of sound, the eerie overtone of all far-away places of late summer. Luce told once more of the wild horses on the desert of Gobi and of the lightnings that could not outstrip them. There was much talk of the Wees, all gone now that the summer had passed, and of the Wos, singing and crying in the tall dry grasses along the sloughs. There was talk, too, of the little men with long, stiff icicle legs and diamond eyes who played white harps in the winter time and made a music as faint and sorrowful as the sound of falling snow.

Karen laughed suddenly, a little short laugh that was perilously akin to a sob. Lucian looked down at her and remembered again that years had passed since they had really believed such things.

"Gosh, I believe you're crying, Spingle," he said with a laugh.

Karen shook her head fiercely. "I'm not. I was only thinking of how happy I was when I really believed in the

little people. Nothing is—is quite the same any more."

"We've got to believe all the more in ourselves to make up for it, Spingle," he said.

And then they fell to talking of other things, of Karen's drawing and of the new copy-books Peter Strand had got from the city and of Karen's hope that she might go to Chicago in a year or so, if the crops were good, and spend all her time in a chosen school of art. They talked until, by the time they had reached Peter Strand's place, Karen was telling all her wild, reckless plans for the future, telling them, too, with all the careless abandon of youth in its day of illusion.

"Oh, I'm going to be an artist, Lucian, a wonderful artist!" she told him. "I know it, I know it! Something tells me—in here!"

She spread her slim, long fingers fan-wise across her breast and looked earnestly up at him.

"I believe it, Spingle, I believe it!" he declared, with a quickening in his heart.

He was glad for her, but there had been times during the past year when the sight of Karen Strand in such a mood as this had made him intensely unhappy. Not so long ago the world had lain before him, too, a kingdom to conquer.

It was this thought that lingered in his mind still when he made his way back alone through the wide fields, before him, like a setting star, the light burning in the window of Hattie's room. She would lie awake awaiting his return. And she would contrive, by some sure means of

her own, to make him feel that he had neglected her. He broke into a run.

Where the path forked into the Murker grounds, there grew a thicket of choke-cherry trees and raspberry bushes. As Lucian hurried up the path there was a scrambling of heavy feet and the clumsy shape of Bert Murker bolted out of his way.

Lucian stopped abruptly. "What are you doing, Bert?" he demanded.

Bert's peculiar guttural laugh made Lucian's blood crawl. It was not altogether a new sensation. It was not the first time he had suspected Bert of spying on him. Bert had formed a habit, moreover, of grinning as though at some secret joke whenever he found himself alone with Luce. It was as irritating as it was mysterious.

Luce took a long stride toward Bert, who had retreated a step or two, and seized him by the front of his shirt.

"Bert," he said quietly, "you've been doing a lot of slinking around and grinning to yourself lately. I don't like it. One of these days I'm going to take it out of you with a damned good hiding if you don't quit it. Remember that!"

Bert shivered in his large clothes, like some unspeakable thing in a bag. Luce controlled himself with an effort, dropped his hold upon him and strode away. As he passed through the kitchen he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror on the wall; it was white and drawn.

Hattie's eyes were wide open and fixed on the wall op-

posite her bed when Lucian came into her room. For a moment or two she did not speak to him. At last she smiled faintly and stretched her hand out to him over the counterpane. It was curiously strong and tenacious in its grip.

"Poor Luce!" she murmured. "I ought to be up looking after you. How are your clean clothes holding out? Is the girl tending to them?" She had a glimpse of his face and her fingers tightened about his hand. "Why —Luce, what's the matter?" she asked.

Luce smiled crookedly and withdrew his hand.

"Nothing, nothing at all," he muttered.

Hattie's eyes narrowed.

"What has happened, Luce?" she demanded.

He laughed nervously. "If you must know, I've just had another little run-in with Bert. I guess I lost my temper, that's all. But I'm getting fed up completely with his hanging around as if he—oh, he's just getting on my nerves, that's all!"

He looked about desperately, then got to his feet.

"Luce," Hattie said in a low voice charged with feeling, "there's one thing for you to remember and that is that Bert was here before you. He's my only brother and I won't have him abused by you. He doesn't do anybody any harm, poor boy, and it ain't his fault that he's not as smart as some others. Bert didn't speak against you coming here, remember. You've got to be easy on him."

Lucian stood by the window, looking blindly out into the darkness where there seemed to be no light in all

the world. The heavy, scourging red swept upward to the roots of his hair. A sore constriction worked in his throat and the corners of his lips twitched. His fingers plucked and twisted at the lining of his trousers pockets.

"Luce!" Hattie's voice was suddenly soft as moving velvet. It was a way she had with him.

He whirled about and stared at her. Her hand was lifted toward him. Her head was raised slightly on the pillow, the black turbulence of her hair making a white shine on her face, her eyes impenetrably dark. Below the white slope of her throat her breast showed, rich and full. But he only continued to stare at her without moving from his place at the window. Presently her hand fell slowly back upon the bed. Finally, with an even, deep breath she closed her eyes calmly as though he had not resisted her. And when she was asleep at last, Lucian stole softly out of the room.

Agatha Dorrit was having her own time of it with her family, now that the whole burden of bringing them up in the way they should go rested upon her shoulders. It was not that the work on the Dorrit farm had suffered because of any neglect on the part of her younger sons. The place had never been worked to better effect than during the year since the death of William Dorrit. Manlius had already proved himself a better manager than his father had ever been. He was an indefatigable worker and his ambition never flagged. Nor could he have wished for a sturdier ally than his own brother Arnold. Leona, too, had grown in one brief year so that she was able now to do

most of the work about the house—would have done it all, in fact, more easily and with less grumbling than her mother did her share. Outwardly, at least, and as the world at large measures such things, the Dorrits were on their way to better days than they had ever known. There were those in Loyola who even hinted that the old man's sudden death had been a blessing in disguise.

Whatever others may have thought, however, mattered very little to Agatha Dorrit. With less to do in the house and with less to worry about, outside it, she had more time to devote to ills, real or imaginary, that ordinarily would probably have escaped her attention altogether. There were the Blundell girls, for instance. They had driven out from Loyola three or four times during the summer and had just about lived on the Dorrit farm during the harvest. That was bad enough. But the harvest over, and the threshing done, it seemed impossible for Manlius and Arnold to let two nights in succession pass without a trip into town. How they spent their time Agatha Dorrit could only guess, but their going to town was to no good purpose, of that she was sure. The more she thought of it the more convinced she became that catastrophe impended—and disgrace, too, without a doubt. Her position was made no easier by the fact that she found it utterly impossible to speak to the boys about it. Had it been Luce, now, she would have had it out with him long ago. But Manlius had a boisterous good nature that never would blend with anything serious. On the very mornings when Agatha had made up her mind to

ask the boys what had kept them in town till all hours the night before, Manlius would be sure to make the breakfast hour a time for the most hilarious raillery. One would actually think that he knew beforehand when a stormy scene was being prepared for him and had set himself to make it impossible. Who could do anything with a boy like that? Agatha Dorrit could do nothing, that was sure.

As for Arnold, young though he was, he had a way with him that made it quite clear to everyone that whatever he did and wherever he went was his own peculiar business. He never declared himself outwardly, in so many words. A boy like Arnold didn't have to do that. One just didn't ask questions of Arnold. But what they whispered about in secret, those two, and what they chuckled about when they did not know that she was around, was a problem to Agatha.

Someone had to bear the brunt of the poor woman's misery. And who was there to take it but Leona? Sturdy and cheerful as Leona was, however, there were days when she felt she must run away to get out of hearing of her mother's complaining voice. It availed nothing that she did all the heavy work about the house, or that she explained to her mother that the boys were only growing up and must have their secrets. It was of no use to remind her that they were working like young Trojans and that the farm was being made to yield as it had never done before. Agatha's complaints were not to be silenced by any mere protests from Leona. Besides, Le-

ona was getting a little out of hand, too. She had become so headstrong and unreasonable that one never knew what she was going to say or do next.

There was her attitude to Luce's wife, for instance. Leona had never gone to see Hattie since the day of the wedding. There was a time when Leona and Lucian had been inseparable. They were still great friends whenever Lucian came down for a visit of an evening or a Sunday afternoon. But Leona had avoided Hattie as if she had been a stranger. Worse, in fact. One would think that Hattie had done Leona a wrong that could never be forgiven. She had gone about in a fit of tantrums for a week after the birth of Hattie's baby.

But she had never been so downright unreasonable as she had been a few nights before Thanksgiving Day when Agatha had sent Arnold to the Murker place with an invitation for Luce and Hattie to come down and have Thanksgiving dinner with them. There had been a regular scene, of Leona's making, and Agatha had been served with a generous helping from the gossip that had been going the rounds of the young people who attended Christian Endeavor in Loyola. She learned, for one thing, that Leona had quarreled with one of the girls who had declared that the whole town knew that Hattie Murker had bought herself a husband when she had taken Luce Dorrit. And that wasn't the worst, by any means. Mons Torson's name had been mentioned in a way that—well, there are people everywhere who just seem to be waiting for a chance to see what they can say.

At any rate, Leona declared she would tell Hattie Mur-

ker—she never called her anything else—the whole thing at the dinner table if she was forced to stay and share the Thanksgiving turkey with her. Though she wept into her apron for an hour on Wednesday morning, Agatha was secretly relieved when Leona went off to Lost River to spend the holiday with her Aunt Ella.

Early Thursday afternoon, Lucian drove Hattie's black mare up the short lane that led from the road to the Dorrit's house. Hattie was beside him, looking her best in a new suit of blue serge which she had bought just after the baby had been born. Bert was in the seat behind them, swelling with a sense of his own importance as he held the baby on his knees. Enough snow had fallen during the past week to give the country a "white Thanksgiving," but Hattie had ordered Luce to hitch the mare to the new buggy she had picked from a mail-order catalog and had sent for before she had got from childbed. She was proud of that buggy and of its smart appearance on the road and she had spoken of it again as Luce had turned into the Dorrit lane. Lucian had merely grunted in reply. He had been thinking how glittering white the prairie was under its new blanket, and how, far away, in the faint hollows, one could imagine that the snow was shell-pink, violet, or an almost non-existent blue.

Agatha Dorrit herself came down to the gate to meet them. "Well, well," she greeted them in her homely fashion, "and you *did* get down at last." One would think their coming had been a complete surprise. "Come on in. Let me take the little one, Bert. And how are you all feeling, anyway?"

There followed a deal of bustling about as the visitors got down from their places. Manlius and Arnold hurried up from the barns to take the mare from Luce, who was already busy with the traces. They jostled their elder brother good-naturedly and sent him into the house with the women. Luce hurried away and overtook his mother before she reached the door. He relieved her of her burden, unable to resist the thought, as he stooped close to her, that his mother looked haggard and pitiable and a bit forlorn, despite her hard face. Moved by an impulse of tenderness, he threw one arm about her with something of the old inward shrinking of fear and walked beside her to the door.

Hattie followed Agatha into the house, removed her hat and the light shawl that she wore, and stroked her hair back from her ears as she seated herself in a chair beside the kitchen table. Agatha took the baby once more and sat down to remove his outer wraps. She felt with her quick, dry fingers the fine quality of the wool in the baby's cloak and peered at the dainty silk scallops Hattie had embroidered at its edge. But although she approved of the material and the work, she said nothing. It was not like Agatha Dorrit to give praise. Nor did she comment upon the beautiful robe of machine-embroidered silk, with the large blue silk bow on one side, which Hattie had ordered by mail from the city. It was none of Agatha's affair, of course, but in her time she had had to be satisfied with the things she could make for herself and her children, out of goods bought right in Loyola.

It was Lucian who first remarked upon the absence of Leona. "Where's Leone, mother?" he asked abruptly.

Agatha had been commenting upon the baby's weight, its temper, its resemblance to this one and that of the Dorrit family in infancy. She paused stiffly before she replied to Luce's question. She was a woman who never corrupted the truth with diplomacy. And yet the occasion demanded something more—or less, perhaps—than the unadorned truth.

"Oh—that one!" she remarked lightly.

"What's up now?" Luce persisted, though he had already begun to feel that he had made a mistake.

"She took it into her head all at once yesterday to go up to Lost River and spend the day with her Aunt Ella," his mother told him. "I declare it's gettin' that I don't know what to do with her sometimes. She gets that stubborn there's no managin' her. I've had my time of it, I can tell you, tryin' to look after a houseful all by myself."

Hattie's eyes went to Luce disapprovingly, with little hard points of light in them. Leona's dislike of her had never been a close secret. Her comment was good-natured enough, however, whatever she may have thought of Leona's absence.

"Leona will probably grow out of her ways," she said. "Girls of that age are often thoughtless."

"Haven't I said that very thing a hundred times!" Agatha declared. "Just look at the girls that go to the Endeavor meetin's in town, there. You haven't been down to any of the meetin's yet, Hattie?"

"I've been wanting to go," Hattie said, "but Luce thinks it's a little soon for me to go out much yet, with the weather so unsettled and all."

Agatha's underlip flattened with a disapproval that she could not conceal. "Times is changin', I guess," she observed. "When I had my young ones it was thought downright lazy for a woman to stay round the house more'n a week after. But then—we had work to do in them days."

For a moment it seemed to Luce that the air fairly bristled between his mother and his wife. He was glad that the boys came in just then and gave a fresh turn to the conversation.

"There's someone coming across the south field along the creek," Arnold announced. "Looks like we're going to have a visitor."

"Now who could that be?" Agatha wondered.

No one made a guess and no one seemed to think any more about it until Bert Murker, standing beside the window, spoke up suddenly.

"Looks like Andy Anderson, that," Bert announced.

A moment later there was a knock at the door and Manlius opened it upon a red-cheeked, tow-headed boy, very thin and ungainly, with poor clothes that had long since ceased to fit him.

"Hello, Andy!" Manlius greeted him.

Andy Anderson was the eldest son in a large Swedish family who lived just east of Loyola, near the railroad. They had had a small farm there on which nothing, apparently, could be made to grow and the father of the

family had at last given up farming altogether and had taken work with the section gang at Loyola.

Andy carried a small parcel in his hands which he held out at once as he rushed into speech as though he wished to have the painful task over.

"Ma wanted you should have this for Thanksgiving," he announced to no one in particular. "It's blueberries we got on our own land and ma thought you'd like the jell. She—she said to tell you it makes real good jelly roll and it's good for pancakes, too."

Andy had probably committed that speech to memory on his way along the creek from Loyola. When he had finished speaking, he thrust the parcel into Manlius's hands and stepped back awkwardly from the door.

"That was real nice of your mother, Andy," Agatha said as she came to the door and took the parcel from Manlius. "But sure you're not goin' back without a bite to eat."

"I had my dinner before I left home," Andy explained. "I've got to get back along the creek and look at my snares. Mebbe there'll be a rabbit in one of them. I got to go now."

He was gone before Agatha could urge him further to stay.

"Poor things!" she said sympathetically as she closed the door and turned back to Hattie. "I wonder sometimes how people live at all. That boy'll be famished with the cold before he gets back home."

"Well, you asked him in, didn't you?" Manlius protested.

Of course, of course! But that Anderson family was queer that way. It must be their Swedish blood. Hattie had always thought them "a little uppish" or she would go down there with some old dresses of her own and some old coats and trousers that were about the house. Like as not, Mrs. Anderson wouldn't thank you for it if you did. Agatha opened the jar of jelly and sampled it before she set it on the table. That was delicious, anyhow.

The dinner was good. Agatha had seen to that. Hattie, morever, had never seemed so pleased with everything. The boys made a great fuss over the baby and twitted their mother ruthlessly about getting herself another husband so that they might have a baby of their own in the house. But beneath it all Luce felt an undertone of unpleasantness that he could not define clearly to himself. It may have been Leona's absence that weighed upon him. He had not been deceived on that point and he knew that Hattie was only waiting to get home before she would speak her mind concerning Leona. He felt his mother's querulous mood as keenly as in the old days when he had sat for hours without speaking lest he should say something that would be sure to precipitate a storm. And then there was the slothful Bert, hideously out of place at the Dorrit table where there had always been a more or less lively atmosphere if not, at times, a particularly happy one.

Nor did Manlius help matters much when, half-way through the meal, he announced that he had seen Mons Torson on the road earlier in the week.

"He's goin' up into the woods right away," Manlius

said. "Mert Naley is goin' to look after his place again, all winter. And if you ask me, that Mons is goin' nutty. I told him Luce and Hattie had a fine kid and you should 'a' heard what he said! Whew! Only a half-dozen words, but—he said enough! You'd think he was in love with Hattie himself, or something!"

"He's a big——" Bert Murker snarled, his mouth too full of food, but Hattie put a hand firmly on his arm.

"That'll do, Bert."

Her voice was exceedingly patient, but Luce had become very familiar with the deadly patience of that voice. She could speak like that, outwardly unruffled, and underneath be fairly seething. And then Hattie turned the conversation abruptly to the plans she had been making for the new stone house. She would begin getting the stone out of the quarry in the spring, just as soon as she could get men to go to work for her.

It was with a sense of relief that Luce came finally to the end of the dinner and got up from the table to go out to the barns with Manlius and Arnold where they could smoke their pipes and talk for an hour or so as they pleased. They had not been alone together for half an hour, however, before Bert came down from the house and led the black mare out of the stable without a word to Lucian.

"Where are you going, Bert?" Manlius called as he saw Bert leading the mare to the buggy.

Bert didn't as much as turn his head as he replied, "We're goin' home."

"What the devil now!" Luce broke out impatiently.

"Hell! That's ma," Manlius exploded.

"We might 'a' known better than to leave the two o' them together alone," Arnold observed.

Luce said nothing. There was nothing to be gained by talking, not even a momentary relief from the pettiness that was smothering him. With a sick feeling he helped Bert hitch the mare to the buggy, then walked to the house with his brothers, leaving Bert to drive up behind them.

In the house he found Hattie with her hat on and dressed for the road. The baby was bundled in its robes. His mother, sitting tearfully apart, said nothing as he came in. Luce looked from one to the other, started to speak, realized the utter futility of it, then lifted the baby in his arms and went out, followed by Hattie. When they were ready to go, Luce slipped back to the door and thrust his head in. His mother was still sitting where he had left her.

"So long, ma!" he said softly. "I'll run down again to-morrow or next day."

When she did not reply, he turned away and got into the seat beside Hattie. He called good-by to the boys and lifted the reins. From the kitchen came the sound of his mother, crying shrilly. A sudden futile violence possessed him.

"God *damn* it!" he muttered, his teeth clenched.

Beside him, Hattie seemed totally unconscious of his violent mood. She did not speak until they had reached the road and had turned north, homeward.

"After this, Luce," she said quietly, "you will remember

that I did not marry your family when I married you. I can get along without them."

Lucian did not reply. He was thinking just then of a story Manlius had told him about Nan Miracle.

CHAPTER VI

When Luce Dorrit's son was a year and a half old, he was permitted, on fine spring days, to sit on a buffalo-robe which Luce spread on the ground for him and watch his father at work on the stone wall he was building on three sides of the site of the new house. Luce worked on the wall only in his spare time. It would take him more than a year to complete it, even with the niggardly assistance he got occasionally from Bert. It was Hattie's hope that the wall should be a fitting complement to the great stone house, the material for which was already being blasted out of the quarry and cut against the time of building.

It was on a day in that spring, when the fields seemed to be crackling under the noisy April wind and the swamps were whipped into a shining blue that ran like rivers, and the racy smell of the soil stung in the nostrils, that Andy Anderson came up the slope from the road. Luce was at work on the wall, and the baby, in his red coat, sat on the buffalo robe near-by with his toys.

The boy approached with a sensitive diffidence in his manner. He looked half hesitantly toward the house before he came to where Lucian stood with his back against the stone wall, relighting his pipe.

"Hello, Andy!" Luce greeted him cheerfully. "What has started you wandering about the country?"

Andy smiled and flushed a little. "I came out to see if I could get work in the quarry," he explained in that direct, boyish manner of his. "Is Mrs. Dorrit home?"

He glanced toward the baby as he asked the question. The child rewarded him with an arch smile and proceeded to get down on all fours, a preliminary to rising.

Luce shook his finger at him. "No, no, son! Stay there!" He stooped and set him back in his place on the rug. "He likes your looks, Andy. That ought to be a recommendation. Hattie has gone over to the Strands'."

"Carrie had pneumonia," Andy said seriously. "Is she all right again?"

"Just about, I guess. She's been sitting up for the past couple of days." Luce looked Andy over, a little doubtfully. "Work in the quarry is pretty hard for a boy, Andy."

The lad colored. He did not seem particularly rugged, even for a growing boy of sixteen.

"I guess it's hard, all right," he said. "But they need money at home and besides—I thought I might save a little."

"Going to have a bank account of your own, eh?"

"I wasn't thinkin' of that, much," Andy replied. "I was thinkin' I'd mebbe take one of these correspondence school courses."

Luce bit his pipe suddenly. It was apparent that Andy had never confessed his ambition to anyone before. A correspondence school course! How often had Luce himself, when he had been sixteen, read the advertisements of such courses as they appeared in farm journals!

How often had his ambition flamed up only to subside miserably an hour or two later at the realization that there was no money in the Dorrit family for the like of that! He could have smiled now at the pathos and the humor of it all.

"What kind of a course, Andy?" he asked sympathetically. "I was going to take one myself once, but I never got the chance."

The boy seemed suddenly to yield to Lucian's evident understanding. His confusion dropped away from him and a keen eagerness came into his face.

"In electrical engineering," he replied quickly. "They say there's a wide field for that."

Lucian could hardly resist smiling. The familiar phrase took him back over the years. A wide field. It was thus the advertisements had read, even then.

"I see. And I suppose you want to get away from Loyola just as soon as you can, eh?" Luce suggested.

Andy frowned a little. "There ain't anything for me to do here, except farm," he said. "I figger if I take that course I can make more money away from home to send 'em than if I stayed on here. That's my idea."

How he strove to put his case as a man might put it! What a priceless thing was a boy's ambition! Luce felt his heart suddenly warm to Andy Anderson.

"Go to it, Andy!" he said. "It's a great plan. I think, maybe, if you went on up to the quarry and spoke to the foreman up there, he might be able to do something for you. I heard Hattie telling him this morning that

he would have to get some more men. Go right up and talk to him. I'll be wishing you luck every minute."

Andy lingered a moment before he turned away and smiled down at the baby playing on the robe.

"Gee, he's a cute little cuss, ain't he?" he observed. "He's almost as big as our Joe, only he's purtier." He dangled his worn leather gauntlet before the baby for a moment, then added loyally, "Joe's smart, though. He can say just about everything."

Andy struck off in the direction of the quarry and Lucian resumed his work. The boy's brief visit had recalled once more a strange mood that had possessed him from time to time ever since he had begun building that wall. He was literally building a wall about himself, about his life, shutting him out from the world of wide horizons in which he had once moved. What he could not quite understand was the complete calm that attended the act. Had he become reconciled at last? And had his surrender brought him happiness—or an unspeakable despair? Or was it that he had simply ceased to think of himself emotionally? There was no feeling left in him, it seemed, except the deep tenderness that had grown within him for the tiny, friendly creature who sprawled about there on the buffalo robe and babbled to his toys. There were no dreams left in him, except the dreams he was already building for his son.

On the afternoon of the following day, Doctor Muller drove his melancholy team north from Loyola to the

Strand farm. In one pocket he carried a small box of chocolate-covered cherries, in the other the first volume of poems by Walter de la Mare. Karen Strand was well enough now, after the long dragging weeks of pneumonia, to be indulged with a titbit or two.

Muller drove into the Strand yard and hitched his team to a fence on which a freshly washed woolen blanket, two sheets and a pillow-case had been hung to dry. A gentle look which people did not often see there appeared on the doctor's face as he stood for a moment and looked at the bed clothes. He knew that Peter Strand had washed them himself, his broad, knotted form bending over the wash-tub at night after he had come in from the fields. Muller sighed. There were times when his cynicism almost failed him before the spectacle of the pathos and romance of human life.

Peter Strand waved to the doctor from the field that bordered the farmyard, and securing his horses to the fence, came running in his lumbering way to meet him.

"How's everybody to-day, Peter?" Muller greeted him as he came up.

Strand beamed, the bright sun picking out the reddish bristles on his jaw. The drawn lines that had come into his face during the past six weeks relaxed now into bashful, happy smiles. He was not the man to show great emotion, this Peter Strand.

"She iss getting muts stronger," he announced, leading the way up the steps to the doorway of the snug square house. "So strong I have to look out or she gets up and vill go *out*side." He laughed fondly, cleaning the mud

from his shoes on the scraper which was fastened to the stoop.

They entered the kitchen and Strand motioned silently to the doctor to go into the other room. Muller, smiling his crooked smile, understood. Strand wanted him to steal in and surprise Karen, whom he had not seen now for three days. Cautiously he opened the door and saw that the tall back of Karen's chair was turned toward him. He stole across the rag carpet on tip-toe. The girl was apparently asleep. She did not seem to have heard him come in, nor did she move when he stood immediately behind her chair.

Glancing down over her shoulders, however, he saw that she was engrossed in a drawing that lay on her knees. The doctor's quizzical eyebrow rose in amusement. It was a likeness of Hattie Dorrit, with a subtlety of expression that was quite remarkable.

He thrust his hat down suddenly before her eyes.

"Oh!" she burst out, clapping her hands. Swinging about, she laughed up at the doctor and caught his sleeve. "I thought it was Kjaere!"

"Ho-ho!" Muller exclaimed, his eyes on the drawing.

She turned it down quickly and put her two hands over it. "How long have you been standing there—spying?" she accused him.

For answer he drew the gifts from his pockets and placed them in her hands.

"Oh, how lovely, lovely!" she exclaimed. "Poems! And—oh! Can I eat them all—every one?"

"The poems—*no!*" said Muller, pulling up a chair.

"Nor the candies, either. Just one a week until"—he drew out his watch—"until four o'clock to-day. After that—one every hour with a little water."

Peter Strand came in then, hesitatingly, his face breaking into a timid smile. It seemed hard for him to realize that Karen was actually getting well again, so inured had the poor man become to trouble.

"She's getting the roses back again in her chin, eh, Doctor?" he observed delightedly, stroking his large hands.

Karen laughed gently. "Not *chin,* Kjaere—*cheek!* He always says chin when he means cheek," she told Muller, "because the Norwegian word for cheek sounds almost like *chin.*"

The big, awkward Peter smiled in confusion, but said nothing.

"Kjaere is beginning to look better, too, don't you think?" Karen said. "I've been an awful worry to him." She smiled at her father and stretched the box of candy out to him. "Isn't Doctor Muller good to me? And this book, too—with the lovely drawings in it!"

"He has done so muts I can't t'ank him enough," said Peter. "Some day—eef I get reets——"

"We'll talk about that when you do get rich, Peter," said Muller bruskly. "Where did you hide that picture I saw when I came in?" he asked, by way of changing the subject.

Karen blushed and pulled it out from beneath the blanket in which she was wrapped. "It's a—a study—of

Hattie Dorrit," she said demurely. "She was over yesterday afternoon."

"Yes?" Muller observed, eying the drawing critically.

"Yes, and she brought some awfully good plum preserves, too. I started to make the drawing of her as soon as she left."

"So that's what you do to people who are nice to you," he said, tapping the drawing lightly with his finger.

Karen colored faintly. "I can't help it if that's the way she looks to me," she observed. "And she was very nice, too. She took down the curtains and carried them home with her to wash. Kjaere didn't like it a bit, either, her taking them home with her."

She chuckled and looked archly at her father, who looked confused and started to remonstrate.

"Now, you know you didn't, Kjaere," she laughed. "You thought you had cleaned everything and she acted as if the curtains were only a little part of the dirt and that she'd have taken the whole house home with her if she could."

Muller chuckled drily as he regarded the drawing. There was more in it, probably, than ever Karen would have admitted.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded. "Is it so funny as all that?"

Muller laid the drawing aside. He glanced at the windows, denuded of their curtains.

"When are the curtains coming back?" he asked irrelevantly.

"She said she'd send Luce over with them to-day, but he hasn't come yet," Karen replied. She looked out of the window as she spoke, the window through which the road to Luce Dorrit's was in plain view. "I don't think he will come, either. I guess he doesn't think about me any more."

Muller suddenly found himself vaguely disturbed. He looked down at the shining, shapely head of the girl, and an idea, bewildering and stark, broke upon him.

"Darn me for a romancing old fool—after all these years!" he thought to himself.

He glanced from the window and saw, on the road below the Murker hill, the figure of a woman making her way toward the Strands'. Peter Strand had caught a glimpse of that figure, too. He got heavily to his feet and told the doctor that he must get back to his plowing.

"So long, Peter," Muller replied. "I'll stay only a minute or two."

Peter Strand went out and Muller became engrossed immediately in the purely professional duties attending his visit. In a very short time he put his hat on and turned toward the door.

"I've got to get along, girlie," he told Karen. "The country is full of sick people and you're all well again. Don't forget to take that new medicine and have Peter bundle you up and set you outside for a while to-morrow if there's a sun and not too much wind."

He patted her hands where they lay idly folded in her lap and noticed as he did so how delicate and young they

were. As he went out, he sighed, he scarcely knew why.

Before Hattie was within greeting distance, the doctor was out of the yard, driving at a speed that amazed his ancient nags, now that they had become confident that there could be no earthly reason for so much haste.

With the spring rains the view from Doctor Muller's single office window became increasingly dingy. Standing there, he could look out upon all the ingloriousness of Loyola: a pit with the blackened ruins of a stone foundation still standing about it and within it the charred débris of a building, tin cans, old wheels, broken glass, tangled wire and nameless rubbish. Beyond was Main Street, a slimy black welter now of mud and water. Still farther beyond was the prairie grass and Nan Miracle's house, close beside the railroad track. It was a season of dissatisfaction, even for Doctor Muller, who had long since declared himself reconciled to life in its most sordid forms.

He escaped as often as he could out upon the country roads along which spring was tracing her green, delicate filigrees. Here on the grassy slopes of the ditches blossomed faithfully the pastel-tinted morning-glory, the purple spray of the buffalo-bean, and, in its time, the sturdy, sweet wild rose. Slowly and more slowly the reluctant grays were permitted to jog along. Muller, his eyes traveling from the Torson place on the west to Hattie's house on the hill, and eastward to Peter Strand's acres, was deep in thought.

In his hunting down of the prosaic bodily ills of the

simple-hearted men and women who lived about Loyola, the doctor rarely missed an opportunity to indulge the more fascinating and obscure pastime of delving into the ills of their souls..

Not that he often meddled there. He was too wise, too selfish, perhaps, for that. Unless, of course, as sometimes happened, those problems of the inner life became explicit in some grievous outward form.

There was Mons Torson, he reflected, whose rare personality defied analysis. Muller had never known Torson well, but he had always granted him that admiration which is the just claim of physical prowess. He had not seen Mons for months. People said he was doing his trading now in Lost River and odd whispers were going the rounds in Loyola. Mons Torson wasn't himself, that was all there was to it! Some of the more speculative of the gossips harked back to the tragic death of his brother Ben and found in that an explanation of the surliness that seemed to be creeping over the smiling Mons. Others said that his solitariness was doing it—that he ought to get himself a partner, or, better, a wife.

Muller had heard that Mons had one night threatened Blundell with violence because he had made so bold as to suggest that he ought to be married. Some day, doubtless, Mons Torson's life would take a turn that would bring consternation to the hearts of those quiet people who had known him for years. Muller had long since learned how to pick out, here and there, the men and women in his district whom Fate had favored for some grim frolic of her own.

May swung her garlands into June, and again it was summer. Doctor Muller, moving at a snail's pace along the dusty road, could see Karen Strand on her father's farm, flitting about like a painted butterfly in her bright clothes. She had a love of color, that girl, the doctor thought to himself. It would not be long now before she was grown beyond Loyola—irretrievably beyond. A little farther along, and there in the Murker cornfield—that was prize corn that Hattie grew—a man moved about under a wide-brimmed straw hat. Muller squinted. The man was carrying something—lifting it up in his arms. It was Luce Dorrit, all right, carrying the baby with him among the tall stalks. The doctor pulled down his frowsy brows. The building of the great stone house had begun, too, he saw. Up the north road now, and his eyes turned to the Torson place. There was a man there, too—bent over as though he were digging at something in that slight hollow below the shack. Probably Mons had set out a garden there. And yet—it seemed too far away from the house for the location of last year's garden. Wasn't that where the stand of willows had been?

August of that year, an August of gray, withering heat, when clouds of rain hung maddeningly for days on end above the parched fields without yielding one refreshing drop. It was in that month that Luce Dorrit's son died, after an illness of only a few days.

Muller, alone in his office a week later, fingered the grimy cards that had become grimier with the oppressive heat and strove to forget the image of the stricken face

of the child's father. It seemed as though he could not get away from the sound of Lucian's pleading voice. He had come out of the house and found Lucian sitting on the kitchen door-step in the unstirring night air, waiting. Muller had told him that the boy could not live. Luce had lifted a perplexed face, his heavy brows knitted.

"But look here, Muller," he had protested vacantly, "he can't die—just like that! He just can't! Why, he—he's such a companionable little fellow. I've had him out on the binder with me on cool days and he was beginning to take a real interest in things—everything. Why—he's a real little person, Muller. You have no idea!"

The doctor had lost count of the number of times Luce had mopped his dripping brow that evening; and he had kept picking at his finger-nails, too, in a disheartening fashion. Then, when the tiny life had flickered out at last, Lucian was like a man who had been stunned by a blow. As for Hattie—there was a woman for you! She had wept, to be sure, and she had adopted a mourning that had been a sort of invalidism, but after the funeral of the child she had assumed a sphinx-like control the like of which Muller had never before seen in a woman. She had made the builders go on with their work as if nothing had happened. She had put a couple of extra men to work on the wall so that it would be completed in time. She had gone ahead with her plans as though that stone house were a living thing itself that had awakened within her an unholy passion.

Muller had called on her during those days and had found her sitting decorously before the window of the dining-room, from which she could look out and see the men at work. She had been dressed in a soft black silk, with a necklace of jet beads, and in her hair were combs of tortoise shell set with brilliants. And she had said to Muller, with her strong, subdued voice:

"We've got to go on. It was God's will that the baby should be taken from us. But there will be others. We must work and plan for them. . . ."

The indomitable will of the woman!

For Lucian there seemed no solace in anything after the loss of his boy. The old feeling that he had known before the birth of the baby returned to him now, overwhelming him at times. The tender companionship he had shared during the past year with his growing son had passed, incredibly, and had left him utterly defenseless against the cruel feeling that something was drawing him in and under, like a strong, outgoing tide. Even during the heavy days of harvest and fall plowing, when a man must throw his whole strength into the race against an unfriendly season, the mood would come upon him like a black cloud.

With the closing in of colder weather, work was halted on the stone house and in the quarry. Then came the early darkness and the long evenings with Hattie in her low rocker with her hands full of sewing or seated beside the lamp at the table, poring over the mail-order catalogue.

It was on one of those evenings, late in November, that Hattie spoke up suddenly, her hand flat upon the catalogue which lay open before her.

"I've decided to get an organ for the new house, Luce. There's two or three real nice ones here—and not so dear, either."

Lucian was scanning the pages of the Lost River *Courier* that had come that afternoon with the mail-carrier.

"Why not get a piano, Hattie, while you're about it? They're easier to play. I picked out a few tunes on Blundell's piano last week, with one finger."

He laughed and threw his paper aside. Hattie drew up her shoulders.

"I like an organ best," she said drily. "I never think the hymns sound so good on Blundell's piano as they do on the church organ. Mebbe that's because I always wanted an organ when I was a girl, before there was any pianos around Loyola. And then an organ is cheaper and we have to think about that a little, Lucian."

Her voice was very gentle, very deliberate.

"An organ it will be," Lucian said. There could have been no other possible reply.

He picked up his paper and went on with his reading. Hattie broke in now and then with mention of other things she would send for to furnish the new house. There was the brocaded plush upholstered rocker with the silk tassels. She had wanted one like that for years, only she had never had a place to put it. And there was the long clock, of carved wood, for the wall. She thought

it would be nice to have one of those tall lamps with the fringed shade.

Lucian made no response. He knew that she expected none. She was really talking to herself, thinking aloud.

"I've made up my mind on one thing, Luce," she said presently in a voice that commanded his attention.

He looked over his paper at her.

"I'm not going to waste time making clothes for our next baby," she said. "You can get them just as cheap and just as good in here."

Bert, sitting at the other end of the table from Hattie, giggled aloud to himself. He had been whittling all evening on a "figure-four" trap for rabbits.

"I think it's time for you to go to bed, Bert," Hattie ordered.

Luce, silent behind the meager defense of his newspaper, could not help marveling at the amazing confidence of his wife. He wondered, vaguely, whether he would ever have the courage to oppose that confidence with a will of his own. He had been thinking about that lately. . . . His heart beat thickly.

It was only after a number of such evenings in which Hattie had sat making her plans that Lucian went at last in desperation to call on Muller. Where else could he have gone?

As he flung the door open and strode in, Muller had a moment of apprehensiveness. Luce Dorrit's brows were drawn down in a black scowl, his mouth was nervous, his whole face wretched. Muller motioned him to a chair

and proceeded, with shrewd irrelevance, to tell him a story as dramatic as anything those northern prairies had given him. It was a way Muller had when he saw that a man was sorely beset with his own troubles.

"I never told you the experience I had—a good many years ago, now—when I was practicing in South Dakota," he began abruptly. "I had a patient on a homestead there—just north of the town. He was an old man and was hit pretty bad with rheumatism. He was not long out from Scotland. Old age and rheumatism, it seems, are nothing to the Scotch. He wasn't in the country a year before he married a waitress that used to work in a restaurant in town. She was young and easy to look at. Old Sandy got it into his head that she was too easy to look at. And that's what killed Sandy—not his rheumatism."

Luce's face relaxed into a smile in spite of himself.

"It's the truth, Luce," Muller declared. "He took her to town a couple of times. When he found her talking and laughing with a couple of young bucks who used to come into the restaurant, he drove her back home and never let her out of the house again. But poor old Sandy couldn't shut the door on the girl's thoughts. He began to get wise to the fact that his pretty wife was thinking things that didn't have much to do with her mate. Now here's a funny thing, Luce. Sandy became so possessed of jealousy without any visible reason that he went out and got himself a reason that he could see with his two eyes. He brought home a hired boy, a good-looking youngster he was, too. And he set those two together and

just waited for his chance to make an example of them. I used to get around to see the old man pretty often. I watched those two kids falling in love with each other and I watched the old man waiting like some old lion. I made bets with myself on how long it would be before Sandy would catch them. I couldn't do anything about it myself, could I? I couldn't warn the wife. I couldn't warn the boy. The only thing I could do was—well, just wait."

"I suppose Sandy caught them, at last," Luce ventured, his interest awakened.

"I—I think he did," Muller said.

"You think he did? Did he kill them both?"

Muller laughed. "No. Not quite as bad as that, Luce. You see, you never know just how a human being is going to act. Sandy didn't come home one night. When the boy went out to draw a pail of water in the morning, he found the old man's body in the bottom of the well with just enough water to cover him. Now, then, explain that, Luce!"

Luce stared at the doctor for some time after he had finished his story.

"Hm! I know," he said at last. "You're telling me that life is hell!"

"Nothing of the kind, boy." Muller laughed. "I'm just telling you that there's a whole lot of things that can't be explained by the preachers—or the doctors, either, for that matter."

"What's the use in trying to explain it?" Luce broke out. "And what good would it be if you could?"

"Interesting, that's all," Muller retorted.

"Interesting enough for you, when you have nothing to do but look on at it. But it's hell enough for the man who has to live it."

Muller drew himself up and looked at Luce, his eyes narrowing.

"Luce Dorrit," he said, "what's got hold of you? I thought that story of mine would sort of shake you up and make you feel better for a while."

"It'll take more than a fairy story to do that for me, Muller," Lucian said dejectedly. "I've just about come to the end of the rope."

"Hold on, Luce, my boy. You're losing your sense of proportion. The fact is, Luce, I've seen this coming. When you came through that door just now I knew it had come. The trouble with you just now is that you think there never was another situation like yours. Let me tell you something. I knew a man once—I knew him very well—who got himself married to a woman—a strong-minded woman. He couldn't stand it, so he ran away, finally. The trouble was, however, that he never could run far enough. If a man's an idealist, he can't run away—because he can't run away from himself. You came in here to talk to me about it. That's all I can say to you, Luce."

Luce frowned, fought down a surly impulse that rose suddenly within him, then let his eyes wander to the small window of the office.

"I'm not talking about running away," he said at last, and turned upon Muller with hard eyes. "I settled that

with myself long ago. I'm going to stick. But I'm not going to go down. I've decided that just lately. What I came to tell you is that I'm not going to bring any more children into the world to——"

"Easy, boy, easy," Muller cautioned him.

"I mean it! I may as well admit it, Muller—I'm a coward, a miserable, spineless coward. I'm as afraid of Hattie as I ever was of my own mother. It's something I can't break in myself. I got it from my father. I'm not going to take any chances of handing it on to a son of mine."

Muller smiled. "I should say, Luce, you're speaking now like a brave man," he observed quietly.

Lucian got to his feet and began walking up and down the little room, his heavy shoes creaking over the floor. He halted suddenly in the middle of the floor and looked at Muller standing beside the window. "Right now," he said, "I'm glad—glad that little Luce died. He was the one friend I had—and the best—but he's better where he is."

But Muller kept his silence. He had fixed his gaze, piercingly, upon the distant chimney of Nan Miracle's house showing its faint column of smoke against the dull sky.

That winter was like a gray elastic band stretched to the breaking point across Lucian's consciousness. The close, forced intimacy with Hattie, her serene, casual references to their future in the stone house, her unwavering confidence in all her plans for children yet unborn,

filled him with anxious suspense. Some night, he knew, she would break that suspense and he would be forced to declare his resolve. Through those long winter months he waited for her to speak and under his silence Hattie knew that he was waiting. Her pride kept her silent. And so they waged their wordless struggle until spring came and Hattie threw herself desperately into the visible materialization of one part, at least, of her plan—the completion of the Stone House.

When the masons were at work again and the men were blasting once more in the quarry, Lucian was in the fields with the cool earth underfoot and all about him the faint stirring of new life under the warming sun. Once more, it seemed, life was not utterly futile. As he rode up and down the long furrows behind the horses, or stood on the crown of Blacksnake Hill, above the snow-storm of flowering choke-cherry trees and the dead underbrush with its potential malice of young nettle, he could almost capture again the spring moods of his boyhood. In this way was Lucian lured along by the chance, assuaging beauty of a season. Those imponderable days of April left their mark upon him, made him older after they were gone, those days of low clouds scudding, dipping, raveling away. Rain hung in those clouds, a pleasant, warm promise. But in the fields below Blacksnake, for all their early green, there lingered still the dun brown of a withered year, like a memory of sadness.

There were moments of rare delight when Karen Strand would come over, in the soft twilights, to visit an hour with Hattie and watch Luce at work on the stone fence.

She never failed to captivate them with her whimsical, friendly talk, her quaint bits of northern song which her mother had taught her, and above all her great faith in herself and her tremendous schemes for the future, pathetic in their unquestioning simplicity.

After one of those visits, Luce came in from his work on the wall and found Hattie standing at the stove preparing the porridge that was always cooked at night for breakfast the next morning. Karen had gone home alone a full half hour before, without pausing a moment where Lucian had been at work. He had thought it strange at the time. Now, on entering the kitchen, he sensed something strained in Hattie's manner. The explanation was not long in coming.

"I don't like that Strand girl being around here so much," Hattie remarked with a faint tightening of the lips. "A girl of seventeen is old enough to know things."

Lucian paused abruptly on his way to the dining-room. He had experienced an acute sense of shock.

"Why, Hattie! What do you mean?" he exclaimed.

Hattie sniffed. "Hm! You know well enough what I mean. A girl of seventeen is old enough——"

"For what, for heaven's sake?"

"For mischief, Luce Dorrit! I declare, are you plain stupid, or are you just pretending to be?"

"Good Lord, Hattie! Do you mean to say *I'm* not safe with her? Why, Karen is a child to me, always will be. I've known her since she was learning to walk!"

Lucian could not help laughing.

Hattie, infuriated, drew back her head, her throat stiff.

"Well, if it ain't you it might be the hired man, or Bert, if I've got to say it," she burst out. "If you heard half the things I do about the girls around Loyola, you wouldn't be such a dumb innocent. What's more, I warned her tonight not to come here so much."

The blood stung up into Lucian's cheeks. For a moment he was too angry, too revolted by Hattie's vulgarity to offer a retort. Then, instead of replying, he strode with his long, swaying step across the kitchen to where he had hung his old felt hat on its hook, opened the door and went out into the soft darkness. It had become a habit with him to escape this way from Hattie's castigation. Conflict with her was subtly dishonoring, even harder to bear than his own feeling of shame and cowardice as he strode across the pasture to Blacksnake Hill.

Here, then, was an end to his and Karen's friendship. His last little contact with something sweet, something young, something that belonged infinitely to his own youth, was gone. An emotion of hitherto unexperienced loneliness overtook him. He fell to thinking of Karen and what she would do now for a sympathetic listener to her great plans. And suddenly it came to him that this break in their friendship was inevitable, that Karen was growing up and that people would never tolerate such a companionship, whatever Hattie might think of it. His indignation at the abiding order of things mounted as he continued to think of Karen and the pleasant years of knowing her as an unusual, stimulating child. All at once he found himself thinking of her as a person quite apart from himself, a person with whom he had only a slight acquaintance.

He discovered himself dwelling with a queer surprise on her appearance, her manner, her voice, her radiant detachment.

When he started back home from the slope of Blacksnake, he felt confused and vaguely unhappy, though his mood had nothing whatever to do with his clash with Hattie.

And now a thing happened that was to define Hattie to Lucian as nothing else had; that was to stamp her with all her fanatical, almost sinister love of power.

It had been a point of great importance with Hattie that all the hand implements that were used in the quarry during the day should be returned to the Murker house in the evening. On a Saturday night, when darkness had come down suddenly with a blowing rain, Andy Anderson approached Hattie in the summer kitchen where, by the light of a lantern, she was paying the men their weekly wages. Andy had been the last to present himself, the other men having already gone.

"Where is your crowbar, Andy?" she asked him, seeing that he carried nothing.

Andy blushed suddenly and turned his hat about in his hands. "I—I forgot it, ma'am," he stammered. "I had to get my coat where I left it—and I laid the crowbar down while I went fer't—and then I came back and I—I clean forgot it."

Hattie drew an impatient breath. "Well—I can't stand for carelessness," she declared. "Go back and get it before you get your pay."

Lucian, who happened to come in from the barns as Andy went out, sensed that something was wrong. He had caught a glimpse of the red, confused face of the boy. When he had closed the door he spoke to Hattie.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a low tone, pausing on his way into the main kitchen.

"Just some more of this not caring about other people's property," she said. "I'm good and sick of it. As if we haven't lost enough!"

"Has Andy been losing something?"

"He left his crowbar in the quarry. I sent him back to get it before he gets one cent of pay."

Lucian started. "You don't mean to say you've sent him all the way back to Blacksnake on a night like this, Hattie?"

Hattie met his eyes and he was startled at her expression. "I'm tending to this, Luce," she said curtly.

To hide his anger, Luce passed abruptly into the other part of the house.

Later that evening, when they were seated at the supper table, Hattie said suddenly: "Funny that boy hasn't come back with the crowbar. Ran home, like as not, rather than do what he was told. Well, there'll be no more work for him, if that's what he's done."

Lucian did not reply. He was thinking of Andy and the jar of blueberry jelly. Poor little Andy Anderson, who read advertisements in the back pages of the magazines! A few minutes later, Bert, who had gone across Blacksnake earlier in the day to a farm on the other side, burst through the door, white as paper.

"What's the matter, Bert?" Hattie demanded querulously as Bert stood dripping in the middle of the floor, closing and opening his mouth without uttering a syllable.

He turned half-way from them and began to wave behind him with his arm. "Over there—on Blacksnake," he gasped. "Down in the blastin' pit—somebody's layin' down in there. I near fell over him." He began to tremble uncontrollably.

Hattie got swiftly to her feet. "Bert!" Her voice came like a whip across the intervening space and her brother cringed. "Who was it? Tell me, this minute!"

"It was—that kid—that Andy Anderson," Bert stammered. "And he's deader'n a rabbit full o' buckshot!"

"Good God, Hattie!"

It was Luce's voice, shaken with horror. Hattie turned upon him, her white face suddenly scarlet, her hands clenched at her sides. Luce, looking at her aghast, saw that her arms were shaking.

"Oh! So you blame me, do you?" she gasped, scarcely able to articulate. "I suppose you're tickled to death to think this happened, just so you could say it was my fault! You—you—God, I could hate you!"

The color had ebbed from her face again, leaving it frozen. Luce drew back from her, his eyes narrowing. He pushed away from the table and got to his feet, ignoring Hattie.

"Hitch up Blackie, Bert," he said shortly, turning to Hattie's brother, who was still standing with his hands hanging limply before him, his face quivering. "I'll drive to Loyola."

Hattie, her breast rising and falling with agitation, suddenly flung out: "No! I'll go myself. I'm not going to have you make a fool of me in this, Luce Dorrit!"

She went quickly up-stairs. A moment later she appeared in her black, severe outer garments.

"All right, Hattie," Luce said, nodding with a grim smile, "you go. Bert and I will go to Blacksnake. We can at least cover the body from the rain. Come on, Bert. Hitch up for Hattie first."

Irrelevantly he wondered to himself whether Andy had saved up enough money to pay for that correspondence course.

PART THREE

THE QUARRY

CHAPTER VII

From her kitchen window Hattie could see Mrs. Blundell's buggy coming up the road from Loyola. With a sharp exclamation she turned suddenly upon Bert who had just brought in an armful of kindling wood and had dropped it with his usual clatter into the woodbox.

"Mrs. Blundell is coming up the road," she announced quickly. "I suppose the whole town will be coming out now to see what they can get to talk about!"

Hattie had recovered quickly enough from the shock of Andy Anderson's death. She was never disturbed much by facts, however ugly they might be. She had driven to town the night before and had officially informed Blundell of the tragedy on Blacksnake. She had waited coolly while Blundell summoned Doctor Muller and had driven back with them through the rain and the darkness. When they had taken the body from the quarry and had come back to the house, she had answered all their questions quietly and had dismissed them very late with the hope that the unfortunate affair was closed so far as it affected her. She knew how to face facts and to dispose of them.

All day, however, she had been annoyed by a feeling as of something unseen that was creeping upon her. She had taken Lucian sharply to task when he had admitted to her that he had not slept all night. Since early morning he had gone about in a moody silence that was almost

intolerable. Even Bert had moved about the house like some dumb creature, unspeaking. And now—Mrs. Blundell coming up the road from Loyola!

"You had better go up-stairs and stay there," she advised Bert who stood now in the middle of the floor, his eyes toward the window. "Go on! You give me the creeps, standing there."

Bert shuffled up the stairs, only to take his position on the landing above, where he could sit and listen unseen to the conversation below. He had no sooner vanished from sight than Luce came into the kitchen and remarked that he thought that was Mrs. Blundell coming up the road.

Hattie turned upon him. "I'm not blind," she retorted. "She *would* come, of course. She'd give her eye teeth for something to talk about to Mrs. Tingley and her set. I knew last night, by the way she looked at me when I went to get Blundell—I knew she'd be on her way out here before another day was over. She'd 'a' come out last night if it hadn't been raining pitchforks." She paused suddenly in her scurrying about and looked shrewdly at Lucian. "You watch yourself, Luce. She's coming here to find out whatever she can and you'll——"

"I guess I'll leave all that to you, Hattie," he told her.

As he spoke he passed out into the summer kitchen where he took some tools from a cabinet in the wall and then left by the back door so as not to be seen by the approaching visitor.

There was a sharp rattle of wheels in the dooryard. Hattie, on her way to greet the visitor, removed a lid from

the stove and dexterously shifted the tea kettle over the flames. Then she opened the door.

Mrs. Blundell's erect body seemed to be bursting with pent-up excitement and curiosity. The gravity which her face bore as a tribute to the grief in which the whole community was taking part seemed almost ridiculous, even to Hattie.

"Oh, you poor woman!" Mrs. Blundell exclaimed, whisking into the room. "I couldn't sleep all night for thinking of you—with this happening on your land. And just when the new house is coming along so nice and all. Just like a bad omen, as I told Blundell this morning. No—I can't stay but a minute, so I won't take off my things. Thanks, just the same. I've got to go right back and meet Mrs. Tingley. We're going to see what we can do for the poor boy's mother. Oh, how sad, how sad! And you, Hattie—how on earth will you ever get over it?"

She seated herself, almost panting, on the edge of a chair, and spread the two ends of her small mink neckpiece out upon her flattish bosom. Hattie moved serenely to the stove and put another stick of wood on the fire.

"I saw you coming," she said patiently, "so I put the kettle on. You'll have time to take a cup of tea with me anyhow?"

Mrs. Blundell sighed, and the two tails of the neckpiece heaved agitatedly. "You're so thoughtful, Hattie, no matter what happens. Real hospitality, I always says, comes out in times like this."

Hattie, her brows perplexed, gave Mrs. Blundell a

pained, uncomprehending smile. "I don't really see why I should be so upset about it, Mrs. Blundell," she ventured. "I feel very sorry for the lad, and his people, of course, but *I* couldn't help his falling into the quarry, could I?"

The pointed face of Mrs. Blundell became a study in bland sympathy. "No—of course. I've been trying to tell people that. It's a crying shame the way people take up every little thing and make as much of it as——"

"I suppose they're blaming me for it all now," Hattie interrupted with a wounded air.

"I'm doing all I can in my poor way to stop it. You'd think after Blundell's clearing you and Bert and Luce of all the blame that people would be satisfied and let the thing drop. But no—they've got to talk about something and Loyola is the worst place I ever knew for talk. As Mrs. Tingley was saying, a person has got to be dead and buried before he's safe from the tongues in Loyola. Though why *she* feels that way about it, I don't know. I've never heard a word against her, except that she's not half as sick as she pretends to be most of the time. Now don't go spreading a cloth, Hattie—I'll just take a cup in my hand."

"It's no trouble," Hattie said calmly. She glanced from the window as she spoke and saw Lucian at work on the stone wall. "Poor Luce is more upset over this than I am," she went on. "I keep telling him it was no fault of ours and that we couldn't help it, but he keeps saying that he shouldn't have advised the boy to take work here. As if there was any sense in that."

"That's like Luce, ain't it? I just wish I had time to stay and talk to him a little about it. I've always been able to talk to Luce—somehow."

A rueful, martyred smile passed over Hattie's face as she poured her visitor's cup of tea. "Well—I'm glad people are blaming *me* for it, if they must blame anyone. Perhaps Luce will stop thinking it's *his* fault, anyhow."

Mrs. Blundell clicked her tongue lugubriously against the roof of her mouth. "Don't worry too much about it. As I was saying, I'll do all I can to stop them talking. I'm not one that fails a friend. You know that, Hattie!"

Hattie sat down and sipped her tea. "I'm going over to see Andy's mother myself," she observed quietly. "I think it's my place to go—as soon as I feel it's decent to."

It was a gentle thrust at Mrs. Blundell, but that worthy woman recovered quickly.

"Mrs. Tingley always knows just what's proper in such cases," she replied sweetly. "My—I do learn so much from her. And she's always so helpful when there's trouble. The better I get to know her the more I think of her."

Mrs. Blundell sighed as one humbled before the favor of the gods.

Hattie bore herself with flawless poise until her visitor finally left. Then, as though it had been held in leash until that moment, her anger broke loose. Her cheeks flamed scarlet, then suddenly paled. She called harshly up-stairs.

"Come down here, Bert! There's work to be done,"

she said. "Get the milking over early, I want you to drive me to the Andersons' to-night."

Bert stole downstairs and shuffled his way out of the house. When the door had closed behind him, Hattie abandoned her pretense of industry about the kitchen and threw herself into a chair beside the table. From where she sat she could see Luce Dorrit at work on the wall outside. Her husband! The cursed stone wall! The farm buildings and the fields—and Loyola in the distance! How she hated it all, the whole contemptible array of people and things, everything that fell within the widening field of her vision. Why should Luce go moping about the place, with never a word for her? Why should the Blundell woman trouble herself to come all the way from Loyola just to tell her that the people of the town had spent the day talking about her? That was it! They had hated her because they had never been permitted to know her. They had always wondered about her, wanted to know what she kept hidden within herself. They had hated her because she had been too strong for them, too aloof, too mysterious!

She began to tremble from fear, self-pity, vexation, defiance—all in one. Let them hate her! Let that man who was her husband think what he liked, feel what he liked. She was herself now, strong with a resolve born of the despair that threatened her. She would fight her way through it. Whatever she did to life now, it was not one half so cruel as the thing life had done to her. Her mind dwelt a moment on Mons Torson—and the willows. If Mrs. Blundell knew that!

She got abruptly to her feet. She smiled, her head lifted proudly. As she moved across the room to the stove, she tucked a strand of loosened hair back smoothly behind her ear. In the gesture there was infinite self-assurance, composure.

She went down into the cellar and took from the preserve shelf a jar of rhubarb. She would make a rhubarb pie for supper. Luce liked rhubarb pie. Up into the kitchen again. She was actually humming a little tune now. Luce Dorrit must never know what was troubling her mind. He must never know that she had been watching him for weeks, aware all the while that he was drawing away from her. She knew how he felt now as he thought of the tragedy in the quarry. But he must not know that she knew. After all, she had married him. She was his wife. Marriage was holy. Luce Dorrit was still her husband and he would stand by her now, or—she drew her breath in sharply, sibilantly between her teeth. Luce Dorrit would know that he had a Murker to reckon with. She could wait, as she had been waiting now for weeks. A shiver ran through her body from the very vigor of her resolution. Presently she began again humming a tune to herself as she worked.

The plaintive sound of a bell came from the yard outside. The cows had come from the pasture for milking. In spite of herself she felt a dull mood of melancholy creeping over her. There had been a time when she had permitted herself to dream, at this twilight hour, of slipping down to the gate of the pasture and meeting someone there . . . not Lucian Dorrit. Hattie threw her

head back impatiently. How often had she rebuked herself for thinking of him, longing for him over and above her humiliation, her anger, her hatred! How often she had told herself that her life must be rich, full, and content—without Mons Torson. Again she began to hum to herself—the stone house would be ready soon . . . people would be coming to see her more, she would take her rightful place in the district . . . there would be children . . . there *would* be . . . and contentment, and work, and forgetfulness, too. There would be a fullness of living such as befitted a body and a mind like hers. After all, she would be victor over life—and over Mons Torson!

She began to sing now, in the strong, unmusical voice which she used in the church choir. Soon, she thought, she must send for the organ she had picked from the catalogue. Perhaps they might have choir practice, on Thursday evenings, in the new stone house, when it was completed.

She lighted the lamp and went out to see how Bert was coming along with the milking. Lucian, at work on the wall, could hear her singing in that voice that was so different from the one she used when she spoke. It struck him suddenly that she betrayed something in her singing that was not revealed in her controlled, level speaking voice. He thought it curious that he had never admitted it to himself before. When Hattie sang he felt actually afraid of her. Years ago, he had feared his mother when she had broken into song. His mind drifted pleasantly

to the memory of Karen Strand's singing . . . crooning one of her strange, age-old songs from another land. Hattie had never liked Karen's singing.

When Lucian left his work and went down to the milking pen, he found Hattie on a milking stool beside one of the cows. He wondered a little. Hattie had not often deigned to help with the milking. "Women have enough to do raising a family without helping with the outside chores, too," she had said once to a neighbor within Lucian's hearing. Perhaps she was planning to go somewhere to-night and wanted to have the work over and done with. Lucian, looking at her straight, determined figure seated on the stool, thought how very mature she was becoming. How full her breast was, beneath her gingham apron, how strong and round her arms! He was only a boy beside her. Again the bewildering certainty came over him that he had been living with a stranger, that this woman who was his wife was utterly unknown to him, that the very substance of her was a mystery. And he had thought, young fool that he was on that night of snow, that he had come to know her too well for any relationship but marriage!

Without speaking, he took his place on a milk stool not far from her. He knew that she was waiting for him to speak. But her very presence there was crushing to him. Since the tragedy of the night before he had been in a daze of horror. Through it all he felt numbly, but with increasing strength, the brutal, unconscionable will of the woman he had married. All night long he had been con-

fronted dreadfully with the thought that he, too, like young Andy Anderson, had been a victim of Hattie Murker's fanatical will.

"I'm going down to the Andersons' to-night, Luce," Hattie's voice came to him at last. "Bert can drive me down. You can do the separating."

"All right," Lucian replied.

Presently Hattie got up with her pail and went into the house. Lucian watched her retreating figure, with the slight full swing of her hips, her black pleated skirt under the gingham apron a little shorter behind than in front. He recalled, with a grim smile, that his mother had once criticized Hattie as a seamstress on the ground that "she didn't have the sense to allow two inches in the back for a figger like hers."

It was incredible to Lucian that Hattie could go so unperturbedly about her usual routine with the memory of what had happened on Blacksnake still heavy upon them all. Beneath her outward calm, he thought he detected her determination to show the world that she accepted none of the blame for the Anderson boy's death. He had seen that in her ready response to the questions that Blundell and Muller had put to her the night before. But Hattie's defense of herself was of little concern to Lucian Dorrit now. His mind had turned inward upon itself with terrible clarity. He saw himself now, as though it were someone else, on that night of white moonlight, white snow, an ignorant boy suddenly aflame with romance and high ecstasy, seized upon in one sensitive, defenseless moment by a power of shameful ruthlessness.

He no longer thought of himself as that boy who had done a wrong and had offered his life to atone for it. He was a man now and that narrow morality that had governed his thoughts and emotions then was no longer potent within him. He had heard Manlius and Arnold tell of their escapades, unblushingly, jokingly. No consideration of moral duty would ever trap them into marriage. No, they had escaped that high, unfortunate purity of William Dorrit, Lucian thought bitterly, that purity which he himself had inherited entirely. The years had brought a change, however. Irrelevantly enough, the death of Andy Anderson had crystallized a new code within him. He saw Hattie now as a woman whose cold designing was without a grain of human pity. He recalled every detail of that night of snow, nearly four years ago now, when he had paused at her gate. He remembered the look of her blanched, secretive face, the sudden enveloping gesture of the shawl she wore, her deep voice. . . . It was shameful enough to admit it, even now, but the Lucian Dorrit of that night had undeniably been seduced by Hattie Murker!

Well—the milking was done now. He would have to go in and make some kind of effort to eat, sitting down as usual at the table with Hattie and Bert.

"I'm taking that old leather coat of yours and a couple of your old shirts down to the Andersons, Luce," Hattie said cheerfully when they were at supper at last. "Mrs. Anderson can make them over for the little ones. It will give her something to look forward to doing when the funeral is over."

Lucian did not reply. Somehow, he did not want to be drawn into any conversation about the Andersons.

"I've decided to pay the expenses of the funeral," Hattie went on. "Not as if it's my duty. And like as not I'll get small thanks for it." She sighed patiently. "But I've always been ready to do too much rather than too little."

She hid the irritation she felt when he did not reply. She sat back slowly in her chair and regarded Lucian with a smile.

"Do you know, Luce, you've said exactly three words since you sat down to this table to-night?"

Her voice was light, casual. She might have been remarking upon the fine weather they were having. The only indication that she was suffering any annoyance at Lucian's quiet was the upward pursing of the corners of her lips and the stiff drawing down of her upper lip over her slightly prominent teeth.

Lucian looked at her swiftly, without raising his head.

"I don't think I have anything to suggest, Hattie," he said shortly, turning away from the table. He bent forward in his characteristic posture, his hands hanging loosely down between his knees, his eyes on the floor.

"Nothing to suggest, eh?" Hattie mimicked with harsh mirth. "Well, I'd think you would find something to say about it. You seem to forget, Luce Dorrit, that I'm a woman—one woman against that whole dirty townful of gossips and slanderers who have been waiting for a chance like this to get their tongues going. I need your help, Luce, and all you have to say is that you have nothing to

suggest. I ought to be able to—to come to you—and——"

Her voice ceased suddenly and she got up from her place. She walked to the foot of the stairway, then turned and looked toward Bert who had paused in his eating and sat gnawing at his fingertips.

"Go and hitch up, Bert," she commanded. "I guess I can do this myself, like I do everything else."

Bert floundered out of the house and Hattie went upstairs. Lucian lifted his head and looked after her, impatient with himself because he could find nothing to say before she disappeared above. In spite of what had passed through his mind during the day, he could not help feeling pity for Hattie now, and annoyance with himself. Where now was that old resolve of his, that determination to play up? The truth was he didn't want to play up. He had been doing nothing else for four years. He could not help thinking now what a simple, clear-minded thing it would be just to get to his feet, take his old hat from its hook there on the wall, and his corduroy jacket, and walk out of the door—everlastingly away over the prairie, under that lonely sky where a silver hair of a moon would be hanging now. . . . How very simple to walk away from it all—and how impossible! The spirit of William Dorrit was too strong within him. There had been born within him something that made him stay, some unhappy adherence to duty from which he would never be able to free himself, some fatal instinct that was stronger than anything else in his being. His heart hung heavy as lead. He had a sense of groping—groping with

hands that were numb as stones. His life had dawned upon absolute darkness.

Bert drove Hattie to the Anderson place that lay to the eastward, on the outskirts of the village.

When they had come to the poplar-pole gate before that shambling group of buildings, so forlorn under the quiet evening sky, Hattie turned to Bert.

"If you think you can hold your tongue," she said severely. "You can come in and sit."

Bert blinked solemnly and nodded his head as he got down to open the gate. Hattie, with the sense of well-being which always filled her when she observed the less fortunate situation of others, let her eyes rove over the sad buildings of the Anderson farm. Some people, she thought, just didn't seem to have the knack of getting on in the world. It was shiftlessness, mostly, and lack of will, she had always insisted. The plain truth of the matter was that old man Anderson himself was to blame for his boy's death.

Whose fault was it that Andy had to go to work in the quarry?

"Hurry, Bert, for land's sake! Have I got to do that for you, too?"

Bert's muddled wits finally solved the intricacies of the gate latch. Hattie squared her shoulders impatiently as he got back into the seat beside her.

"Mind what I tell you, Bert," she admonished again. "You keep quiet."

Someone had come out of the house. It was Anderson himself. And there was one of the children running up

from the barn. Hattie smiled contentedly. It was really good to be able to do things like this for people. She was probably the only one in the whole district who could do it without feeling the pinch.

"Oh—it's you, Meesis Dorrit!" Anderson, the tall thin Swede who was the father of this family, said to Hattie as he stepped up to the buggy. His voice was curiously formal, Hattie thought. But the Swedes *were* that way.

"Yes, it's me, Mr. Anderson," she said in a hushed voice, stepping down from the buggy. She noticed that Anderson did not help her down. But that was because he didn't know any better. "Bert—you tie up."

Anderson's long face, with its thin cheeks and high cheek-bones, was almost expressionless as she turned and looked at him in the wan light.

"I supposed you had so many here to-day, I put off coming until I was pretty sure nobody else would be here," Hattie said kindly. "I didn't want anyone else to know what I came about."

"You better come *in*side," Anderson said hesitantly. "My vife she iss not feeling good, but my-be she talk to you."

Hattie followed him into the house, which was immaculate and almost bare of furniture. In this tiny abode of four rooms the family of eight had been brought up, in heartless poverty. Now, in the room which was pathetically called the "parlor," the eldest of the brood lay—but not on the cabinet folding bed in which he had dreamed his boyish dreams. Hattie did not go into the parlor, which was in darkness save for the light that

streamed into it from the kitchen lamp. In the remote shadows, however, she could see the simple coffin arranged on two chairs. The kitchen seemed to be full of children, all sitting about, decorous and large-eyed, on the home-made chairs. The thought came to Hattie that if they had been her children they would have been taught not to stare so openly at a visitor.

One of the boys rose and offered Hattie his chair. Just then Bert came in and seated himself on a stool near the door. The silence of the place seemed suddenly to embrace him so that for a moment he sat uneasily looking from one to the other of the Anderson children in mute embarrassment. Finally he settled back with his shoulders against the wall and fixed his gaze upon Hattie. Anderson passed heavily into one of the inner rooms, presumably to apprise his wife of Hattie's arrival. Hattie sighed and smiled with precise sadness at one of the little girls, who hung her head while her feet squirmed in their heavy shoes. She thought the children very discomfiting. She pulled off her black silk gloves and laid them tidily across her lap. Presently Anderson returned to the room, his wife behind him.

Mrs. Anderson was a small, shrinking woman, considerably stooped from hard work and child bearing. She spoke English brokenly and with great diffidence. Her face now was blank with grief, a grief made startingly more harsh by the evident fact that she had not shed a tear. Hattie's discomfort became acute as Mrs. Anderson moved forward and offered her her hand in absolute silence.

"I came over as soon as I thought you could stand seeing anyone, Mrs. Anderson," Hattie said, inclining her head commiseratingly to one side as she looked down at the little woman and patted her hand gently. "I want to help all I can."

Mrs. Anderson withdrew her hand and motioned to Hattie to be seated. Her lips were tight-drawn, her face set in hard lines. Anderson seated himself heavily in a chair vacated by one of the children.

"Here iss not'ing you can do," Mrs. Anderson said in a voice that seemed to come from a great distance. "Our boy iss dead."

Hattie pursed her lips at the corners as she bent forward. "But there must be some little thing I can do, Mrs. Anderson. You know—" she lowered her eyes to her lap for a moment and paused, drawing in her breath regretfully,—"we all liked Andy. I had Dolly all hitched up and was going to send Bert home with him if——"

"You couldn't o' done that, Hattie," Bert broke in ponderously. "I left Dolly up in the north field."

Hattie turned upon him a narrow, piercing glance before which he seemed to wither utterly. Then she continued evenly.

"You know I meant Blackie, Bert. I was expecting Bert in any minute and had made up my mind to send him down with Andy as soon as he came back from the quarry. I would have come down myself rather than let the boy walk all that way on a night like last night." She paused, a bit nettled. "But what I really came over for," she went on presently, when neither of the Ander-

sons made reply, "was to tell you that I want to pay the expenses of the funeral—and all." Her voice was brisk now, full of confidence. "We don't even have to let anyone know about it. I know how hard it has been for you. And it'll be harder now with—with Andy gone. So if you'll just go ahead and do everything, I'll pay——"

"T'ank you, Meesis Dorrit," Mrs. Anderson interrupted, her face unchanging, "but dat ve could not do. Ve take care ours children v'en dey live—ve do so v'en dey die, too. T'ank you so muts, no."

"No, no," her husband put in hurriedly. "It iss good of you, but ve do not need it. Ve get along, all right."

Hattie smiled benevolently. Of course they were proud, she said. She admired that in them. But was she not a friend, after all, and could they not let a friend help them in the only way she knew how? There was so little anyone could do at such times. But no, she could do nothing. The Andersons were not unpleasant in their refusal, but they were very firm. She could do nothing.

Hattie's face colored, in spite of her gentle smiling. When she could say no more, she got to her feet, her skirt swishing smartly as she moved toward the door. She shook hands warmly, first with the mother, then with the father. In the eyes of both she thought she detected a look of suspicion, perhaps of mild contempt for her offer. She could not help feeling that Bert's ill-timed remark had much to do with their refusal.

"Well," she sighed, her brows gathered into a knot as she looked down at Mrs. Anderson. "If you'll talk it over between yourselves—and change your minds about it

—let me know. It's only a little for me to do and I do want to help if you'll only let me. Good-by, children. Come, Bert."

Anderson followed Bert and Hattie out of the house.

On the road home, after an ominous silence during which Bert clung to the reins with moist, trembling hands, Hattie turned furiously upon her brother.

"You chicken-brained fool!" she broke forth. "Didn't I tell you to shut up? Didn't I?"

"Ye-e-s-s," Bert trembled.

She lowered her voice and spoke with cruel deliberateness. "I can't stand for this any longer, Bert. You're going down to the city, that's all there is to it. I've had to put up with this kind of thing too long. You haven't a brain in your head. I've kept you with me because you're my brother—when you ought to be in an institution where——"

"You—you didn't tell me you was goin' to say that," Bert pleaded in a blubbering voice, drawing himself as far from her as he could, to the side of the seat.

"I told you to shut up, you idiot!" Hattie snapped.

Bert began to shake from head to foot. His quivering silence finally became intolerable to Hattie.

"Quit that!" she ordered. "And remember—the next time you do a thing like that, I'll send you away!"

Relieved, Bert sat up straight and attentive. After a brief moment of silence, he spoke to the mare with the tone of fine authority, "Get up there, Dolly!"

CHAPTER VIII

The stone house grew daily in size and impressiveness. Lucian, lifting his eyes toward it as he worked in the fields, began to have an actual dread of it. As the massive structure took shape it seemed to become animate, a great, gray, feelingless creature that would one day reach out and draw him irresistibly into its granite bosom.

Hattie's pride in the house was manifest. Already she was making plans for the great house-warming to which everyone of any account in Loyola and about was to be invited. She would not be niggardly about it.

She could well afford to be generous now, Lucian reflected bitterly. Hadn't she got everything she wanted? Everything except that one desire upon which they had waged their silent conflict for weeks, a conflict which Hattie, with obstinate pride, still refused to acknowledge as such. There had been one or two approaches to a scene between them on that question of children, but Hattie had cautiously maintained her dignity, biding her time.

To a man content, work in the fields may bring a sense of deep peace and abiding happiness. His heart delights in growth. His mood grows mellow with the ripening days. But to a man whose life is beset with conflict, the quiet of the fields serves only to turn him inward upon himself in bitter brooding. The fears that assailed Lucian Dorrit in those days drove him almost to despair. It was not that he feared the gossiping tongues of Loyola

now, nor did he give much thought to what his mother and his brothers might find to say about him. He was singularly detached, it seemed, from the outside world. Was he afraid of Hattie? The thought of her brought the blood pounding to his temples. The very fact that such a fear had taken hold of him made him hate himself. He was no man. Even now, after four years of living with her, every thought of her made him feel contemptibly her inferior. A mere gesture on her part, a look of the eye, could humiliate him exquisitely. It had come to him finally that she had really despised him from the very first. Why, then, had she married him?

Through all the confusion of his thoughts, however, one fact stood out clearly. There would come a moment, soon, when he would have to prove himself stronger than Hattie. He was schooling himself now for that moment. He knew by her attitude, by her vast planning for the future, for *their* future, that she was confident of herself, that she believed implicitly in her power to overcome him when the crisis came. He knew, moreover, that she had set her mind upon bringing that crisis about as soon as the house was ready. Hattie was not building that house to no purpose. Scarcely a day passed now in which she did not drop some significant hint of what was in her mind. Well, the moment would arrive eventually. He would have to tell her the truth then, plainly, bluntly. There could be no children where there was no love.

Full summer was upon the land again, with its sweet, rich murmur of growth, its colored vapors, its warm, sweet

somnolence, like the heavy drone of a golden bee. South and west and north the Murker land stood high in wheat, barley, oats and rye, and beyond the pasture land sweet hay grew and gave to the errant wind its wanton, heady perfume. In the midst of this sensuous, triumphant growth an unease took possession of Lucian Dorrit, a turbulent thing from which there was no escape. It seemed as though all the beauty of life were being whispered into his ears with poignant treachery. Turn any way he would, he could not close his heart to that soft, small sound.

Looking up the slope from the field where he spent his days, Lucian would see Hattie moving about energetically —everything she did was done energetically—carrying a pail of water from the wind-mill to the house, tending her shrubs in the garden, walking about among the builders or talking to the foreman. She carried herself with the self-confident air of a woman of mature years. He always thought of her now as very much older than he. The difference in their ages had greatly widened in the past four years. With the hunger of romance upon him, his imagination would substitute the form of a slender girl walking lithely about the yard up there. She would have slim, long thighs, with the wind blowing a light skirt about them, playfully. She would have none of that air of authority that marked every gesture of Hattie's, even when she lifted her apron to shoo the flies away from the kitchen door before she entered.

There were golden hours of release, however, when, in the long summer evenings, he would stalk off alone,

bareheaded and coatless, and sit on the top of Blacksnake Hill while the shadows gathered around him in silence. Those hours brought a throbbing in his blood like the voluminous music of a great orchestra. The poetic dreams of his boyhood, of a love very fine and sweet and dark, visited him again there. In his utter loneliness he could have cried out from the sheer power of the desire that swelled within his heart. But always, on his return, he would avoid Hattie with a positive fear, remembering that it was in such a mood that he had first lost himself to her.

Hattie masterfully controlled her annoyance at Lucian's moods. When he chose to go out alone, his eyes full of that lost look that told her his thoughts were not of her, she smiled generously and let him go, with an admonition to come back before the heavy dews settled, or to put on his coat if he intended to moon up there on Blacksnake until all hours.

There were moments, however, when her annoyance moved her to protest mildly.

"I can't for the life of me see what interests you so much up there on the rocks," she said one night with a a crisp smile as she sat at the sewing machine, working on one of the twenty-five aprons she had agreed to contribute to the church bazaar in Loyola. "If you must go, put on your old jacket. It's getting real cool out. I'll be sewing till you come in. Perhaps you'll like a cup of tea before you go to bed. I declare, a man's more worry than ten children!"

Lucian was already out of the door. But he felt, as he

went away, that Hattie's hands were still upon him, solicitously possessing him, sparing him for her purpose.

He made his way, scarcely seeing the direction he took, to one of the rocky projections of Blacksnake and threw himself down disconsolately, his head pressed forward in his palms. Presently he lifted his eyes and looked gloomily down and across the slough toward the Strand place.

He had not seen Karen Strand now for weeks, except at a distance, across the water of the swamp, when they both happened to be in the pastures for their cows at the same time. Muller had told him that she was thinking of spending the winter with her aunt in Chicago, where she would have an opportunity to study drawing. The old doctor had confessed to a feeling of uneasiness when he had spoken of her. He did not know what was coming over the girl. Her spirit, her old eagerness, seemed to have forsaken her and left her depressed and melancholy. Karen was eighteen now—perhaps that had something to do with it, Muller had said. That and the fact that her dreams of a future were disappointingly slow in taking form.

Muller's opinions often amused Lucian. Dreams, indeed! The dreams of country youth, indissolubly wed in one way or another to black acres! He had had dreams, too. Andy Anderson had had dreams. Probably every man and woman in and about Loyola had had their dreams.

He picked up a few pebbles and rattled them absently in his palm, staring down into the rocks and shrubs of

the slope that fell away from his feet. So Karen Strand was eighteen now. Damn Karen Strand! Had she not been faithless, too? Why should she have kept herself hidden all these weeks just because Hattie, in a moment of ill temper, had told her to stay away? What had Hattie to do with a friendship that had lasted down through the years?

Then—he saw her. She was sitting in the shadow of a stunted hazel tree on one of the lower knolls, looking up at him thoughtfully, her hands clasped in her lap. Had he been less intent upon his own misery he must have seen her when he had first reached the top of the hill. He did not speak at first. There was something in her presence that made him almost ashamed of the thoughts that had been racing through his mind. She sat very still, watching him. The dress she wore was of a vivid red and in the darkening depths of the air made a splotch of purple like some great waning flower. A rugged wall of rock rose behind her, violet, gray, and the impalpable color of faint mist at night. Her feet were curled under the billow of her dress and her head was resting against the rock at her back.

When he spoke, presently, his voice was very low and uncertain, as if he were not sure of what he saw.

"Spingle!"

She did not move. "I was here first," she replied in a voice just loud enough for him to hear.

He was conscious of a sudden tight feeling in his throat. She was a lovely thing, sitting there, with her face glow-

ing, seriously pensive, as he had always remembered it. But because of the deep need that was in him, she was different now—in an overwhelming way.

He got to his feet slowly and began to move down the slope toward her, a sudden burning sensation in his ears and eyes. When he stood above her at last, her eyes fell and her delicate hands moved nervously in her lap.

"I didn't think you were real—at first," he told her.

He continued to stand, rather awkwardly, half turned away from her, one foot lifted to the edge of the rock on which she sat.

"And now—you're sorry I am," she replied, smiling up at him.

"It's not that, Spingle," he told her. "I'm glad. But I was thinking about you just then and you looked so much like—like a painting down here that I thought I must be imagining things." He sat down on the rock beside her. "Why have you been hiding away from me all these weeks, Spingle?" he asked her.

"I have not been hiding," she protested.

"You know what I mean," he urged. "You have stayed away all this time. And now they tell me you are going to the city in the fall—to stay all winter. Have you forgotten me, then?"

She turned and looked at him for a moment in frank wonderment. "Luce Dorrit," she said, "I have not forgotten—I never can. I have been lonely—for weeks." She stood up abruptly, her fingers twined rigidly together, her pale cheek half averted.

Rebellion flamed suddenly in Lucian's heart, and

brought him impetuously to her side. A short, strained cry broke from him as he caught her and swept her up to him crushing her mouth down under his own. Karen drew back with a start, her eyes wide on his. He was staring fiercely into her face. Her body stiffened but she did not move away from him. Their eyes seemed locked for an interminable time, during which neither of them drew a perceptible breath. And in that harsh moment it appeared to grow suddenly dark about them.

Presently Lucian remembered. "Don't be afraid of me, Spingle," he said, his voice breaking.

"I'm not afraid—I'm not afraid," she told him.

Even as she spoke, her voice trembled and failed her, and she clung to him, sobbing against his shoulder. Lucian bent and touched his lips to her soft hair and all his harshness gave way before a great tenderness.

At last she drew herself away from him a little, but clung to his hands and pressed them against her cheek.

"I'm not afraid, Luce," she told him once more, and her voice was low and sure. "But we can't be happy—like this. I didn't want you to know—ever."

She looked at him for a moment intently, her eyes unwavering. Then she moved slowly away from him, down the slope of Blacksnake, and all the color of her became merged in the darker, drowning colors of the night. She passed like a dream.

Lucian Dorrit, standing alone there with a slight swaying throughout his body, let her go. In the depths of his heart he cried out desperately to her, pleaded with her to come back and save him from the utter hell of his soul.

But he knew he must not speak the turbulent words that rose to his lips.

When the last dim shadow of her faded in the mists, he turned away and plodded slowly down the uncertain slope of the hill, across the pasture where Hattie's prize cattle and horses moved lazily or lay like dark blots against the ground. Against the lingering arc of thin light that still hung above the horizon to the northwest, the new stone house stood in sharp outline. Beside it—the low roof of the smaller house where Hattie would be waiting for him. He was going back to her now. All his life, he thought bitterly, would be just that—going back to Hattie.

A little farther along and he could see a lantern moving about in the barnyard. Bert would be going the rounds to see that all was well before he turned in for the night. A small square of light marked the window in the kitchen. Behind that square Hattie would be sitting with her sewing, a look of resolute patience in her eyes. Damn!

She looked up as he entered.

"Well," she said, "you *did* get back. I've kept the fire in the stove and the kettle boiling. It's real cozy to come in to. I thought you might like a cup of tea."

She laid her sewing aside and got up as she spoke. Lucian strode unseeingly past her and sat down on a chair beside the stairway.

"Thanks, Hattie," he said, "but I don't really want any. I'm not the least bit cold."

He began to remove his boots and Hattie, pausing on

her way to the stove, eyed him speculatively for a moment, her brows drawn into a fine frown. Then, with an audible sigh, she lifted the kettle and set it back on the hot water reservoir at the side of the stove.

"Well—I s'pose what *I* do for you doesn't count for much," she observed. "I ought to know by now."

Hattie's house-warming took the form of a harvest festival.

The stone house, completed now, was thrown open to everyone for miles around. The spacious rooms were festooned with ripe sheaves and wild flowers, and Japanese lanterns, strung through the dining-room and the parlor, lighted a spectacle that amazed her visitors. All the floors in the lower part of the house had been waxed for dancing. Gallons upon gallons of lemonade had been prepared, and dozens of cakes and sandwiches. Two fiddlers and three accordion players had been hired from among the country talent and against the wall in the parlor stood the new organ that had arrived from the mail-order house more than a week before.

Outwardly, at least, it was a gay occasion. Luce Dorrit, greeting his visitors as they came up the driveway and alighted before the front porch of the new house, was a hearty host, laughing and shaking hands and jostling his guests with the frank boisterousness that puts country folk at their ease. The glow of a lantern fell rosily upon him where he lounged in his old easy fashion against one of the stone pillars, awaiting the arrival of the merry-makers. He could not have known the handsome figure

he made there, his bronze throat glowing above the open collar of the white silk shirt which Hattie had bought him for the occasion. Hattie was everywhere, looking her best in a new gown that was the envy of all the women, an affair of white lawn with lace insertions, and at the end of a chain about her neck, a gold watch which she kept tucked into her belt. She bore herself more proudly than ever as she went about welcoming her friends. Even Bert Murker had risen to the occasion. He stood before the porch to take charge of the visitors' horses, and invested his duties with an air of solemnity that sent the men into the house chuckling to themselves and nudging their womenfolk.

Beneath it all, however, Lucian sensed the too apparent mood of vulgar curiosity that had prompted many of the guests to come out. Hattie Murker—she was still Hattie Murker to the country folk about Loyola—had built herself a grand new stone house now. It was beginning to look as if her marriage to that Dorrit boy was a success, after all. Their early pronouncements on that marriage had been a little hasty, then. Come to think of it, there was no accounting for the way some people made a success of their ventures. People like Hattie Murker, especially. Young Luce Dorrit probably knew which side his bread was buttered on—though everyone thought he was more like his father.

There were many young people there, however, whose desire for a good time was not tarnished by any idle curiosity, country girls in white or pink or pale blue dresses,

farmer boys looking self-conscious in tidy store clothes. The Blundell girls came with two young men from Lost River, in an automobile of a more ambitious make than those already owned by many of the prosperous farmers around Loyola. Their arrival had caused a considerable stir and had started whisperings of sharp disapproval among some of the more matronly of the women. The younger ones were shyly envious. Hattie hid whatever feelings she might have had behind an air of patronizing good will.

Nellie Blundell, the older of the two sisters, was evidently in a roguish mood. She rolled her eyes upward and clapped her hands as she regarded Lucian.

"Oh, look at Luce, will you? All dressed up to kill! The great big handsome thing! And a real silk shirt, Sadie! Gee!"

Lucian laughed uncomfortably. "This isn't *my* idea, Nellie," he said. "I'd feel better in my overalls."

"You would!" Nellie scoffed. "But you don't get out of dancing with us now that you're so pretty—does he, Sadie?"

"Not much!" the younger sister replied heartily.

Lucian caught a glimpse of Hattie's face just then. It was dark with disapproval. Hattie was thirty now. She must seem ancient to these girls—girls who were Karen's age. Lucian's cheeks flushed as he realized what they much think of Hattie, his wife, sedate and circumspect, settled! His eyes burned with their blue, lost look as he remembered that he himself had had no such careless,

romantic youth—with the exception of those few golden days he had spent on the prairies just before his father had died.

He knew there was an element of disloyalty in his thinking just now, and an element of untruth. Romance was a trickster. If Hattie was not a romantic figure, she was at least not "talked about" as the flighty Blundell girls were. He should have been proud of Hattie's respectability. He knew that. But something had changed him in the past weeks of mental agony. He could have wished with all his heart that Hattie were talked about. If Mrs. Blundell and the rest of them could read his thoughts now, he would be talked about. If they could only know that his heart was even now wandering across the fields below Blacksnake to be with one whom he had not seen now since that late evening when he had held her in his arms for one precious, throbbing moment! If they could only know that Karen Strand had not been out of his mind for a moment since that unforgettable meeting! If they could only know that above their homely voices he heard her voice, sad and thrilling in his ears, and that her face was before him, against the maze of weaving figures, the little face of long ago, with brown elves dancing . . . and the wide, vivid eyes of a recent summer night, hurt with new knowledge! But they could never know. The outer world would soon claim Karen Strand, while he would go on—as the Dorrits had always gone on—until all romance had faded from the world.

From across the room Hattie called to him, gently, very patiently. He knew by her tone that she must have

called him several times before he heard. He hurried to her.

"You're not sleepy *to-night,* Luce?" she chided smilingly. "I called you three times before you looked around. I think it's time to start the music. Most everybody is here now. We'll go on the floor first so nobody will be backward."

They entered the parlor which had been cleared of most of its furniture. Lucian spoke to the first fiddler and a moment later Mrs. Tingley seated herself at the organ. The accordion players took their places and waited while the fiddlers tuned up. Then the music broke forth in a rollicking two-step and Lucian slipped his arm about Hattie's waist.

Hattie actually disapproved of dancing, but she was not unaware of her duties as a hostess. She became conscious, moreover, of a pleasant exhilaration as she saw the eyes which followed her and Lucian about the room. Gradually, as shyness wore off the company, the floor was filled, the dancers moving at last through the wide doorway to the dining-room. At the end of the dance Hattie was flushed and smiling, a triumphant light burning in her eyes. She had overheard one or two remarks about Lucian that had filled her with satisfaction, with pride. That she was, to-night, envied by the entire community, made up for much, after all.

As they tired of dancing, many of the guests slipped out in naïve threes or fours into the redolent late summer darkness. But down by the stone fence and along the edges of the open fields near the house dark figures moved

furtively about—and there were never more nor less than two together.

At length, when the merriment was at its height, Lucian sauntered out alone and walked to the margin of the pasture beyond which lay Peter Strand's place. It was good to be out here alone, away from it all. If Leona, or his brothers, or even his mother had come to the festival it would not have been quite so intolerable to him. Hattie had invited them to be sure, with formal kindness—through Lucian—knowing very well that they would not come.

The pleasant, watery chur of frogs filled the pure evening. Lucian sat down on a lumpy, dry bit of ground and listened to the small sounds of earth and air blending with the music which came faintly from the house. Now and then two dark figures would stroll out of the farmyard and move westward along the edge of the field, their silhouettes outlined against the reddish liquid air of early moonrise. Lucian watched them go, with feverish eyes. His throat contracted aridly. The knuckles of his hands tightened under the skin.

A hundred, a thousand times, he had told himself that he must not think of Karen Strand. It was madness for him to think of her in the way he had been doing, recreating her before him, so dear, so infinitely desirable. He would have to stop dreaming of how sweet it would be to have her here beside him, in the warm dusk, where he could tell her that he knew now that it had always been so with him—that he had always loved her, somewhere out of space and time. . . . He sat still for many minutes

with a trembling at the core of his body. Then he huddled his knees up in his arms and bent his head down upon them.

Even the dim light of the lanterns seemed to glare when he returned. Hattie singled him out with her eyes at once and Lucian could see the questioning points in them. He remembered, long ago, how his mother had looked at him when he had returned from a stolen hour with a book in the hay-mow, or under the granary on the cool, raw earth in summer.

He made his way straight toward her, feeling a little guilty for having been away so long. But Hattie seemed to be looking past him at someone else. He turned his head and saw Nellie Blundell entering the door just behind him. The meaning of Hattie's look was clear to him now. It would be hard to make her believe he had been out alone. With a feeling of utter weariness he crushed his way past the dancers and came to Hattie's side.

"Everything going all right?" he ventured.

Hattie looked through him. "As good as can be expected," she said tartly. "Perhaps you can start the singing, at least. They're tired of dancing."

Lucian, gnawing at his lips, stood beside Hattie until the dance came to an end. Then he called out in a lusty voice, cupping his hands to his mouth, "Get ready for a sing-song!"

He made an effort at a broad grin as shouts of assent sounded above the babble of voices. Soon he had them all seated, some on the floor, the girls jauntily on the knees of their partners. Lucian, who had a rolling, resonant

voice, took a position with his back to the organ, beside one of the fiddlers, to lead the singing. It was an unfortunate coincidence that Nellie Blundell should, with mock worship, seat herself at Lucian's feet, pretending to desert her escort. A laugh went up at this and Hattie smiled indulgently, as became a good hostess—if one did not observe how firmly her upper lip was drawn down over her teeth, or how narrow was the gleam in her eyes.

It was in the midst of the second of the old-fashioned country songs that something occurred to throw the whole gathering into an uproar. The front screen door was suddenly flung open and Lucian's brothers, Manlius and Arnold, staggered in, hilariously drunk, carrying between them the bellowing, kicking form of Bert Murker, clothed outrageously in the more intimate garments of a woman. A shriek of laughter, led by Nellie Blundell, and intermingled with shocked but delighted squeals, went up as it became clear what their strange burden was, with frills ludicrously about the knees and a pair of stays adjusted backwards and slipped up now under the arm-pits. Lucian, stepping quickly forward, shot a glance across the room and encountered Hattie's frozen look. About the worst, he decided, had happened. The Dorrits had let themselves in for it.

Lucian sprang forward and tore Bert away from his brothers who were by this time helpless with laughter. The crowd had apparently lost all sense of dignity in their ready response to the practical joke that had been played on Bert. Hattie, however, came frigidly across the floor and stood before the two intruders.

Manlius and Arnold, it seemed, had prepared for just such an advance. In fact, the details had been carefully rehearsed. Arney bent down with his hands upon his knees and Manlius, stepping behind him, gave him a tremendous kick that sent him flying through the open doorway. Manlius then bent down in a similar posture and looked appealingly over his shoulder.

"Now you kick me, Hattie," he said.

Before Hattie could give vocal expression to the look on her face, however, Manlius had leaped, frog-like, out of the house into the darkness.

Hattie's harvest festival sank at once to the level of a boisterous frolic. That some of the men had anticipated such a turn was manifest in the fact that their womenfolk caught aromas now and then which could not be accounted for in the amount of lemonade they had imbibed. Some of the more circumspect left early and for Hattie, at least, the night was ruined. The revelry became almost gross at times and Hattie dreaded to think, as she murmured to the scandalized Mrs. Tingley, of what might be going on out there in the dark with no one to remind the girls, like those Blundell creatures, for instance, of their proper places.

Near dawn, when the rattle of the last vehicle had died away down the Murker road, and when Bert, whom someone had consoled with whisky, was asleep in his bed, Hattie locked the kitchen door of the stone house. It occurred to Lucian, standing in the kitchen and watching her, that she was the only person in all that district who locked a door at night. It was like Lucian that in a moment of

crisis he should be struck by some such trivial thought. It was as though his mind clutched at the straw of irrelevance, when reason was no longer of avail. And reason could not cope with a mood such as he knew Hattie to be in now.

Slowly she turned upon him from the door. Her face was livid with the rage of humiliation.

"It wasn't enough, then, that my husband had to shame me before the whole district—but the rest of the Dorrits had to come in and finish it!" she broke forth. "To-night of all nights—when I hoped—hoped to make everybody believe I hadn't married into a family of fools!"

"Did you say *I* shamed you, Hattie?" Luce asked.

"Shamed me—yes—before them all! Sneaking out of the house—out of your own home—the home I *gave* you —the home you got by betraying *me*—sneaking out with that little slut that every man in town has had—her that's a disgrace and a heart-break to her mother."

"You're wrong, Hattie," Lucian protested dully, standing across the table from her. "I was out alone."

Hattie's harsh laugh of derision broke in upon his words.

"Don't lie to me, Luce Dorrit! You don't have to. I've known all along!"

The scene that followed was merely bewildering to Lucian. All the self-control with which Hattie's life had been bound was swept suddenly away. She flung at Lucian every vicious term of abuse, every vile epithet summoned up by her unbridled fury. She lashed out with her fists and beat him on the breast as he sought to

quiet her, screamed an unintelligible oath as he clapped his hand across her mouth. Then, as he forced her down into a chair, she seemed to stiffen from head to foot in a sort of paralysis. Lucian knew that it was simply because things had not gone precisely according to her plans that she had given vent to her insane temper. There could be no real jealousy governing her now. Her pride, her ridiculous dignity had suffered.

Hattie clutched her heart suddenly and gasped as though with pain. Her face, with its perverted, dreadful passion, was frightening to see. Lucian turned away for a moment to get control of himself, afraid of what might happen if he lost himself now.

At that moment the tide of Hattie's rage turned inward upon herself. She collapsed in the chair, her head thrown backward and her neck exposed, white and writhing from her sobs; she wept, it seemed, with her whole body, shuddering from head to foot at each long, unforgettable cry.

Lucian stood rooted to the floor. He could not go to her. He could do nothing for her. The notion possessed him that this was an experience of hers that had nothing whatever to do with him. He was outside it, an unwilling spectator. There came over him suddenly an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh—or was it to cry?

CHAPTER IX

The season of bewitchment had come again. All the rugged colors of the autumn world had suddenly softened. Dreams walked over a timeless earth. Fancy hung in the gray-pink gossamer of the air at daybreak and at dusk in the low-set evening star.

It was on days such as these that Hattie found herself beset by a mood of hopelessness that was almost panic. She had laid such plans, she had conceived such designs, she had seized her materials and had shaped them with such care—and to what end? She had gone about the ordering of her life resolutely, almost ruthlessly, only to find it crumbling in disorder. At the center of all her fears was the knowledge that her hold upon Lucian was fast slipping. She had done all she could to make him her own. She had cut him off from those influences which she had feared might claim him—his family, Karen Strand, Mons Torson, and yet, slowly, inevitably, he was drawing away from her. Even in the moments of her greatest stress, however, she was conscious of little more than a selfish need of him. She had probably never felt the need of his love. Certainly she felt no such need now. She knew no material wants that she could not supply herself. Lucian Dorrit's coming had brought no change in that respect. But Lucian was her sole bulwark against the community, against the evil, penetrating eyes of those

who, for all their outward show of neighborliness, were ready to flay her mercilessly.

Her lip curled as she thought of the farmers round about, and of the few souls that Loyola sheltered. She had been too clever for them, too clever and too smooth. It would mean simply death now to slip back into defeat, to let the perfect brittle pattern of her life go awry, to let them view the true, stark emptiness of her existence. But they should not. They should yet see children, her children, playing about the great stone house, driving a dog-cart or riding on horseback to the school in Loyola, growing to young manhood and young womanhood and moving out into the world—the kind of rich prosperity through the years that was the rightful heritage of a Murker.

And always, in such moods, she turned to thinking upon Mons Torson. In her heart she knew that she had never loved Lucian Dorrit. She had offered him the richness of herself—she would have to offer it again—but all the love she had ever known had come to her during one burning summer and had been squandered ruthlessly one throbbing night in autumn. Where was the oath searing enough to set enduring damnation upon a man like Mons Torson? Mons Torson, who had taken her and had not yielded himself in return! Mons Torson, who had turned away, laughing, swearing that she had had her way with *him!* Mons Torson, who had looked into her face with those magnetic, deliberate, yellowish eyes of his that maddened her with their scorn, and had told her that he was not meant for marriage! He had said that to her on that

night in autumn when they had been together among Mons Torson's willows. Well, she would show him yet how little her life depended upon him for its fullness and growth. Let him dig among his willows, let him try as he might to break their hold upon that accursed spot, let him labor to the end of his days to tear out the black memory that clung to his heart!

And yet, as she thought of him even now, with this autumn night closing about her, after more than five years had passed since that other night, tears trickled from beneath her tightened eyelids, scalding, aching. She had loved Mons Torson, loved him cruelly, for all his brutality.

Even when, a month or two after she had been abandoned by Mons, her marriage to his good-natured brother Ben was imminent, her wiles having been used on him with success, her success was bitter. Bitter with the knowledge that she still loved, and always would love, Mons.

She threw her head down upon her arms spread on the table, the blue part in her hair showing clearly in the lamplight. The pinkish oil in the lamp sank low to its dregs, the wick began to smoke and then to flicker, with a slight soft sound like the wings of a moth beating inside the chimney.

The outside world, however, knew nothing of Hattie's secret thoughts. To all who had dealings with her it seemed as if her personality was expanding these days, appropriating to itself increased powers, energies, interests. It was as if the new house were challenging her capacities, as if she were actually taking on a grandeur

and consequence to match that gray stone pile. She had redoubled her activities in connection with the Woman's Auxiliary in Loyola and had been exhorting the women of the church to "clean up the town," a proposal that bewildered them at the same time that it won their approval because of Hattie's enthusiasm in presenting it.

Nor did she miss an opportunity to assure them that her life with Lucian Dorrit was as happy as mortal could wish.

"Poor Luce!" she was wont to say. "He's so good about waiting for his meals and all, when I get home late. Last week he had supper all ready for me and waited on me as soon as I came in. It isn't many men would be that good-natured. But—" she sighed, smiling from Mrs. Blundell to Mrs. Tingley, "—it's not many men that are like my Luce!"

When Hattie dramatized herself in such a manner, she almost believed her own account of affairs between herself and Lucian. During the past year especially, her consistent, casually detailed, mild suggestions of the happiness of her life with Lucian had just about convinced the people of Loyola that complete accord existed in the union. Indeed, Lucian and Hattie were no longer the spectacular pair they had been. It was openly observed that Luce Dorrit was "settling down" at last, that he had had most of his "smart-aleck ideas and high-falutin notions knocked out of him by hard, honest work," and that Hattie Murker had, in short, "made a man of him." If any doubts still persisted, they were in the mind of old Doctor Muller, who pawed over his grubby cards and wondered, and

looked from his window to the railroad track, and the prairie, and the house of Nan Miracle, and away off to the shambling buildings of Mons Torson's homestead which lay like a smudge from a steamer on the horizon that lifted in the blue mirage of another Indian summer.

Hattie was at this time deep in a business transaction which she wished to complete to her own peculiar satisfaction. Joe Finch, the young farmer on the other side of Blacksnake, was selling his land and Hattie was intent upon making it her own. She had complained to Lucian for days after Finch had talked with her and had made her an offer—she could not forego the bargain and she could not afford to pay the entire sum in cash just now.

"Luce," she suggested one evening just before bedtime, "that land north of your mother's place—what use is it, anyway?"

Her reference was to the barren strip of land which was all that Lucian had saved from his inheritance.

When he did not reply at once, Hattie went on.

"It's a sin and a shame to own land like that when you can so easy get rid of it and put the money into something worth while. You wouldn't get enough out of it to buy Finch's land, I know, but it would be something toward it, at any rate, and every year that goes by you'll get less for that strip of yours."

Lucian got to his feet and turned to go upstairs.

"That was Pa's land," he said equably. "He cared more for it, worthless as it was, than for all the rest. It meant something special to him, being the first piece he

got from the government when he came out here to homestead. I think we've gone over all this before, Hattie," he concluded wearily. "I won't sell that land—and that's all there is to it."

Lucian started up the stairs.

"Now, Luce," Hattie smiled indulgently, "let's talk sensible about the thing." Lucian had an uncomfortable feeling, however, that her smile only veiled her deeper determination. "It's costing us more in taxes than it's worth," she argued, "and that's something *I've* got to think about if *you* don't."

Lucian flushed angrily. "You mention something of the sort every time you get a chance, Hattie. Don't be afraid that I'm ever going to forget that this is *your* land, and that it's *your* money that's paying the taxes. It's *all* yours, Hattie—and I'm part of it—just as much as your threshing machine is a part of it. I'm not forgetting all that. But when you got me you got that land of Pa's with me and——"

Hattie laughed sharply. "Don't talk nonsense, Luce," she chided. "I had no idea you felt as strong as that about that poor piece of ground. It ain't worth our quarreling about, that's certain. We'll say no more about it. I'll manage somehow without making you sell it. Go on up to bed and I'll be along in a minute or two. I've got my bread to set before I go."

Lucian vanished up the stairway and Hattie went quickly about her work. But as she worked she thought deeply of this silly opposition that Lucian had set up when she had mentioned selling the barren Dorrit acres. It

seemed to her that Lucian was beginning to oppose her in almost everything she suggested these days. As if it were becoming a habit with him. She did not like it. There must be some way of breaking him of it before it became fixed. If he should grow obstinate now—just when she was looking to the future with warm hopes in her heart. . . . She would have to treat him with less indifference than she had done of late. . . . A woman must be gentle, alluring. She must approach her man in softer guise, as if she were the weaker and he her master. Now—if it were Mons Torson she had to deal with . . .

Lucian did the fall plowing all alone now, since Bert had developed, honestly enough, a rheumatic shoulder which kept him in the house. Nothing could have pleased Lucian more. He was free to remain in the fields until near starlight, and a mood almost of contentment enfolded him there. There was a tender melancholy in the amber twilights, a suffused, sad warmth over the brown fields where the patient horses strained in their harness. Here he could think, not of things as they were, but of things as they might have been. Here he could dream impossible dreams without a sudden burst of reality to tear the heart. Here he dared let Karen Strand into his thoughts, because they had become all at once an inviolable sanctuary. He had passed beyond the torment of hopeless hope to a kind of dream state of peace. He had come to feel, now, that he could go on and on, at the end of things, if Hattie would only leave him alone. *If Hattie would only leave him alone!*

In the stone house he moved and had his being, but Hattie had little or no effect upon him. For weeks on end she had shown him nothing but indifference. He had been grateful for that. Of late she had been all tenderness, solicitude, affection. It had annoyed him at first, but it had finally affected him as little as her indifference had done. He could see that his absorption in himself, his constant brooding, irritated her.

"I declare, Luce," she upbraided him one evening at the supper table, "you've acted like a stranger in this house, though goodness knows I've done everything in my power to make things go smooth." Her tone became suddenly softer, then, clinging, as she went on. "You're working too hard, that's what it is—isn't it? You've got to get a boy from Loyola to help you with the plowing, that's all there is to it. You're getting real hollow in the cheeks, I declare!"

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, then went on in the low, intimate voice that Lucian always felt was deliberately assumed. He hated it. "My, I wish these women wouldn't come to-night. Mrs. Tingley and Mrs. Blundell said they'd drive up from Loyola, it being so nice and Mrs. Tingley getting out so little. But I don't feel a bit like having them. I'd far rather we'd be alone to-night."

She got up to go to the stove as she spoke, paused on her way, and came around beside Lucian's chair. She looked down at him for a moment, then drew his head over against her breast. Unconsciously, instinctively, Lucian stiffened his neck, resisted. Quickly Hattie released him

as though she had not noticed his reaction and, chatting mildly, continued her way to the stove and set the tea-kettle over the fire.

"Poor Mrs. Tingley—I just don't know how she gets along on the money he gives her. Her clothes are always mended where it shows and her hats are—years old. And just to think, there was a time when I thought it would be nice to be married to a teacher or a preacher!"

Her loud laughter, harsh and unmusical, completed a scene that stirred Lucian with revulsion.

In fact, he admitted to himself that he was becoming unreasonable of late. He could not listen to her voice, he could not watch her moving about the house, he could scarcely see her seated at the table without some feeling of discomfort welling up within him. Only when he was at work in the fields did his uneasiness subside to a kind of negative happiness for which he was grateful.

Even there, of late, he had been forced to witness something that wounded him unreasonably in spite of all his stubborn resistance to it. Three or four times he had seen Mons Torson take his way through the early dusk along the road to Peter Strand's place. At first he had suffered little more than regret that he could not visit Peter and Karen with the same freedom that Mons Torson enjoyed. Presently, however, darker emotions began to surge within him. On two Sunday afternoons in succession he had seen Torson go down to the Strands'. It was vain to pretend that he did not care. He could not shut Karen out of his heart. He could not curb the new hatred of Mons Torson that had begun to grow there. There were

days in the fields when his thoughts threw him into torment that was little short of madness.

It was in such a mood that Muller found him one afternoon when he drove alongside a freshly plowed field in which Lucian was at work. He waited, leaning against the fence, until Lucian came down the long furrow and turned his plow out of the black soil.

Muller regarded him critically as he left the plow and came toward him.

"Trained down to the bone, I see!" he greeted Lucian with a smile, but his shrewd eye saw something in the younger man's face that left him uneasy, disturbed.

"Hello, Muller!" Lucian muttered. "Come to see if I was putting on weight, eh?"

Muller grinned. "I always begin to worry when the crops have been good for a couple of years. My experience is that good years make men soft. They eat too much and hire too much help. It takes a bad year or two now and then to keep a man fit."

Lucian's face darkened. "Hell—it's a lot you know about it!" he exploded. "Hard work isn't the only thing that can keep a man thin."

Muller smiled and looked at him narrowly. "And there are other things a man can train down besides his weight, Luce," he remarked drily. "A man's got to slough off his vanity—his surplus pride—self-delusion—his pet fears—before he'll ever do anything worth talking about in the world."

Lucian leaned heavily against the fence and looked back along the furrow he had just completed. There

were times when Muller's philosophizing was a little more than he could bear.

"I thought you would come to that—sooner or later," he observed wearily. "Why don't you come right out with it and ask how we're getting on over there behind the stone walls? That's what you want to know, isn't it?"

Muller's brows drew together as he stared at the face of Lucian Dorrit. Things were worse, then, than he feared. He fumbled about for something to say, but Lucian began to speak before he could find words.

"What you want to know is whether I've grown up—or just been swallowed up. That's it—isn't it, eh? You're just as curious as the rest of these damned cattle around here—Blundell and Melham and Mert Naley—and all of them. You're no better than the rest!"

Scarcely knowing why he did it, Muller turned away slowly, without a word, and started toward the road where his old team was waiting. He had gone only a few steps, however, when Lucian turned upon him in a fury.

"Where in hell are you going?" he demanded.

Muller turned and looked at him calmly. "I can't talk to a man in that mood, Luce," he replied. "I can't even try."

"Don't be a damned fool!" Lucian hurled at him. Muller slowly retraced his steps. "Don't you see what's wrong with me?" Lucian asked, when they were face to face with only the fence between them. "Don't you see—my life has stopped—dead!"

Muller cleared his throat uneasily.

"Luce, my boy," he said quietly, "you're too young for that—yet. It would be bad enough for me——"

"What's that got to do with it?" Lucian interrupted. "A man is never too young to go through hell. I thought I'd seen as much as I could stand when I saw her in a temper one night—about a month ago. That woman would kill, if she thought it would do any good. If she thought she'd get anything out of it."

"You mean—it has come to—to a show-down, then?" Muller asked. "She has demanded——"

"Not yet. I wish to God she had. It would be all over with then—one way or another. I'd be through."

There followed a long silence between them, Lucian gazing along the even furrows of the black field, Muller letting his eyes wander aimlessly over the far reaches of the prairie.

"Luce," the doctor said presently, "have you ever faced fairly the question of just why you let yourself in for this? Why did you marry Hattie Murker?"

Lucian's eyes became suddenly a fiery blue. "I didn't marry her for her money, Muller," he snapped, "whatever these swine round here have said about it."

"I never suspected you did," Muller observed, and waited.

"There are things a man don't talk about to another, Muller," Lucian said at last.

"I *did* suspect *that*," Muller remarked. "I thought so from the first."

Lucian looked quickly at the older man and seemed on the point of breaking out once more when the doctor

lifted one hand slowly. "No—don't speak of it in that mood, Luce," he said quietly. "Why shouldn't I understand? Why shouldn't I know? Doesn't it happen often enough? The trouble with you—the only trouble, perhaps—is that you think your case is peculiar, singular. We're all in the grip of circumstance, Luce. That's another thing to remember. How do you know but what the irony that governs us treated her even more cruelly than it did you? It may have done more than we think. It may have given her a will that controls her instead of her controlling it. It may have given her a pride that's her master. And you—you are young enough to emerge, still, Luce. How do you know but that these are your good years, these years of going through hell and sloughing off what you can't carry through life if you do the work you want to do?"

In Lucian's ears, Muller's voice had become little more than a drone. What was there to all this talk? The old doctor meant well, of course. But what of it? Perhaps Muller felt something of the futility of it himself. At any rate, after a few moments of silence, he changed the subject abruptly.

"Karen Strand dropped in on me for a minute yesterday," he said brightly. "She tells me she's going down to art school this winter. Thinks Peter is old enough now to look after himself. She takes it all very levelly, too. Mighty clear-headed, that youngster!"

Lucian's voice was perfectly controlled when he replied. "I'm glad she has a chance to go, at last. I knew she would—finally."

"Karen is one of the few in the world who goes straight to the thing she wants," Muller observed. "Remarkably single-minded, for one so young."

Lucian lifted his eyes then and Muller beheld a sudden exposed look in his face, as though a curtain were drawn abruptly away revealing an inner room, remote and precious. In a moment, however, the curtain was dropped and the younger man's face became a blank.

"You might give her my best wishes, Muller," Lucian suggested, drawing his hat down over his brows. "I don't see her now."

As he spoke he moved toward his plow and Muller turned away and started back toward the road.

"Drop in on me when you come to town," the doctor called back.

Then he got up and took the reins from where he had tossed them loosely over the dashboard. He sat for a moment and idly watched Lucian put his team into the furrow again and start down the field. Then, with a heavy sigh, he shook the reins and the horses started off at a lazy gait that suited the old doctor's mood admirably. The afternoon was languorous, soft. The fields were pale russet along the roads and bluish gray as they rolled out to the horizon. The wires high above the ditches along the road sang their plaintive, traveling song just as they had sung it since the telephone had first come to the district.

Muller sat, hunched forward in his seat, the reins dangling loosely from his hands, his eyes lifted unseeingly to the long narrowing roadway that lay before him.

"Breaking down—that's what!" he said aloud to himself. "She has started her campaign. The boy is done. When she's got the fight all worked out of him, she'll get what she wants. She always does—always will. The son of big William Dorrit. Irish grandmother—English grand-dad. Bad combination—damn bad! Romance and honor. If only . . . What's the use!"

He shook the reins impatiently and sat up. Sodom and Gomorrah quickened their pace to a lazy trot, pricking their ears in a gesture of indolent questioning, as if they were curious to know how soon they might drop back once more into a walk.

The world was full of beauty—but to what purpose? Muller wondered irritably. What was the sense in all this crazy circle of days, this furious spring burgeoning, this lush prodigality of summer, this tawny lentor of autumn, and back again to the white spell of winter? What, indeed, except to keep an old relic like himself guessing?

It was weeks since Loyola had seen anything of Mons Torson. He did all his trading in Lost River now—to the resentment of Melham and others who might have profited from his visits. But the town had shown little surprise at the change that had gradually come over Mons. Bachelors living alone were bound to go that way. Solitude and their own cooking did it, as Muller had told Blundell.

But neither solitude nor any kind of cooking could do what had been done to Mons Torson. He was as lean as a hunting wolf in winter, his face was haggard, with the

cheek-bones thrust out sharply, his yellowish hazel eyes were sunken and restless, the scowl between them looking like an actual cleft to the bone.

Muller drew his breath suddenly on the afternoon when his door was thrown open and he looked up to find Mons Torson eyeing him sourly from beneath his great shaggy brows.

"Well—what ails *you,* Torson?" the old doctor challenged gruffly, falling back instinctively on the defensive.

"Nothing that any damned physic of yours can touch, Muller," Torson replied, looking as though he might pick the old man up in his arms and toss him across the room.

"Tut, tut, Mons! I've cured men who were closer to the grave than you are."

Now the laughter of Mons Torson had in time past been known for its rich, careless quality. In the summer evenings when he used to lounge down the street of Loyola with his friend, Luce Dorrit, and his laugh rolled out on the still air, the eyes of the men as well as of the women followed him. The manner of his laughter now, however, was different. There was scarcely a sound in it. It was little more than a sudden tension in the muscles of the face, a catch in the man's breath.

"Yes—yes," he said, shaking his great head. "You and your cures! You and—you and God Almighty!"

It came to Muller then that the case of Mons Torson might be more serious than he had thought. He remembered other men who had lived alone on the prairies until their minds had broken down under the strain. He resolved to proceed cautiously.

"Come on in, Mons," he invited, "and sit down for a while. I haven't had a chance to talk with you for weeks."

Torson stepped into the office without closing the door behind him and slumped down into a big chair beside the window. Muller got up quietly and went to close the door.

"I drove past your place the other day," he said pleasantly as he came back and seated himself before his desk, "but I didn't have time to stop in. Say, what in blazes are you digging at up there every time I go past?"

Torson hesitated before he replied. When he spoke, his voice was sodden and gray, and emotionless.

"Willow roots, Muller," he replied, thrusting the toe of his boot against the floor as if he had thought to find it soft ground.

"Willow roots?"

"Never dug willow roots, eh?" Torson said with a curl of his lips. "Never watched them till they traveled fifty yards from where they started, eh? Till they get like steel bands and you couldn't blast 'em out because you knew they'd come up again somewhere else. Never did that, eh?"

His voice was cold. Muller regarded him silently for a moment.

"Why bother about them, Mons?" he asked finally.

Mons Torson crossed his arms before him and looked thoughtfully at Muller, as though he were weighing something carefully in his mind. "If I told you that, Doc,"

he said at last, "you'd be giving me pills for hallucinations. And I don't like pills."

Muller began to worry the lobe of his right ear. Damn Torson, anyway! He had seemed on the verge of revealing something that might have been useful in a diagnosis later on. At any rate, he would say no more about the willows just now. He would have to keep an eye on Mons Torson. There was no telling about him now. And why was he sitting there now, not speaking a word, not moving? He decided to try another course.

"Say, look here, Torson," he said in his abrupt professional manner, "I wish you'd get around to see Luce Dorrit one of these days." Torson stiffened, but Muller kept on. "Luce is damned lonely, Mons. You and he used to be friends and there's no one around here who means as much to him as you do. He needs a man's friendship—a younger man than I am. Just now, Mons, that boy is among the damned, I tell you! We've got to do something."

Torson's shoulders came forward suddenly toward Muller, and the veins stood out on his forehead in dark knots.

"Muller," he said with an effort, looking down into the doctor's face with the piteous eyes of a whipped animal, "you needn't tell me anything about the misery of Luce Dorrit. It's been walking beside me—eating at my table—sleeping in my bed—for years of hell without a let-up!"

He got heavily to his feet and the tears started from his eyes as he strode across the room and stood above Muller.

"What do you think brought me here this afternoon, if it wasn't that?" he demanded. "Do you think I'd come to you for any of your damned cure-alls? I came here because there was no one else to go to. You've been looking at me and thinking I'm crazy. You're right. I am. I've been crazy for four years—more."

"Sit down, Mons, and tell me about it quietly," Muller suggested.

"I can't sit down. And I'll tell you about it in my own way—or not at all. I know what's happening to Luce Dorrit. I know—because I did it. And I know what's happening to that Strand kid. I know that—because I did it, too. It's because of her that I'm here."

Muller gave him a quick questioning look.

"You don't know about her, do you?" Torson rasped. "You're so damned full of Luce Dorrit that you haven't time for her. You want me to go and talk to Luce. I'll go. One of these days. Sure I will. When I get the nerve to go, Muller. But not for the reason you think. Not for the reason you think! The reason would turn your heart to water, by God!"

Mons swerved away from Muller and drew himself up with a vicious shrug of his huge shoulders. For a moment the old doctor had a fear that Torson was going to become violent. He had all he could do to remain quietly seated at his desk. It would not be wise to betray his fears now.

"We'll not talk about that just now, Mons," he said quietly. "Tell me what's wrong with Karen."

"Wrong with her? Good God! What's wrong with

me? What's wrong with Luce? It's that damned woman —that cursed Murker woman—that's what's wrong with all of us. I've been over to the Strands' lately. I know how it is with that kid. She's eating her heart out over that boy—that Luce Dorrit. You've got to go and talk to her, Muller. I can't talk to her. I've got to go over and talk to Hattie Murker. I'm going to meet her. I'm going to——"

"Hush, hush, Mons!" Muller soothed.

Torson's voice had become a bellow of rage. He was pacing back and forth in the small room like a tiger in a cage. Suddenly he pulled his hat down over his head and started for the door. At that moment, Muller, looking from his window, saw Lucian Dorrit himself, walking slowly down the street, pause before Nan Miracle's place. His first thought was that he must not permit Torson to leave the office now—with Luce Dorrit in the street. Something told him that the two men must not meet—not yet. With his eyes still upon Lucian, he spoke.

"Just a minute, Mons, just a minute!"

Madly he sought for something to say that would halt Torson. And in those few seconds of nervous suspense a score of vivid impressions raced through his excited mind. He was aware of the faintly bleak, bronze-yellow of the autumn sunset that poured into the tiny garden behind the picket fence and lighted on their stems the asters and nasturtiums that grew there, bright, sharp flowers. He knew that about the small porch of the house Virginia creeper twined and the sun shining through the red leaves showed up the veins, dry, hard and yellow. The host of

things that had been said about Nan Miracle crowded through his brain—there was a way of getting acquainted with Nan Miracle—she weaved carpets on a handloom—she was originally from the east and had an accent that offended the people of Loyola—she was too mysterious for the simple, open life of the town—but she had a kindly way with her—lonely, secluded, strange . . . Lucian was at the gate!

"No, no, Luce, not that, not that!"

Muller was not sure that he had not spoken the words aloud. He came to himself with a start. Torson was waiting beside the door. One more glance from the window—Lucian had passed on—he was beyond the picket fence on his way to the station where he went once a week to attend to the shipping of eggs to Lost River. Muller breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Look here, Mons," he said, his voice suddenly very thin and oily, "it isn't often I ask a man to take a drink with me. But I haven't talked with you for so long, I think we ought to do something about it. Sit down and take one with me. I think you ought to tell me about this business. We ought to talk it over quietly, eh?"

He was talking very fast, scarcely knowing what he was saying. But he was clear on one thing—he must keep Mons Torson beside him until Lucian Dorrit left town. He didn't ask himself why. He was acting on instinct. Damn, if he wasn't beginning to go to pieces himself over this business! He'd better stop talking altogether until he had got hold of himself and knew what he was saying. A drink or two would settle his nerves—a

drink or two with Torson. Mons Torson, who used to be Luce Dorrit's friend! Fiddlesticks! Luce Dorrit, now—and Nan Miracle—why shouldn't he go in to the woman? He—Muller—could do nothing—*would* do nothing! Just now, however, he must keep Torson with him—must keep Torson with him! He bent forward in a listening attitude to catch the words Torson was speaking.

Mons Torson was relentlessly unfolding the plain, sordid story of the willows.

CHAPTER X

On the evening that Lucian came in from planting his last acre of winter wheat, he found Hattie moving swiftly about the kitchen, a spot of high color on either cheekbone that had not been brought there wholly because of her work about the hot stove. From where he had been working in the field he had seen her drive home from Loyola late that afternoon, behind the sleek black mare that he had come to hate, he scarcely knew why. Hattie still wore her black silk dress, the one she usually wore to the meetings of the Auxiliary. In her movements about the kitchen there was the briskness which she always affected on coming home from attending a meeting of that august body.

Lucian hung his old sweater on its hook and his battered hat over it. He turned to where the basin stood beside the door and began, absently, to wash up for supper. It was strange how, the moment he entered the house, his mood changed. He might have been two men.

Hattie seemed cheerful enough, although she spoke little until they were at table. Bert came in late and she was nettled at having to wait. Her impatience with Bert, however, might have been only a result of her having spent the afternoon with the women of Loyola. In their presence, especially when they met officially, she was always precise, sharply decisive. What more natural than

that she should prolong the mood somewhat on her return home? Lucian, on the other hand, was not sure that her annoyance with Bert was not a veil to some disgruntlement that had arisen during the afternoon.

Presently, when they were all three seated at supper, she laughed lightly and looked up at Lucian.

"A funny thing happened this afternoon," she said. "At least I'm glad *I* can think it's funny." She paused enigmatically, helping Bert to potatoes before she resumed. "Us women went and talked with Nan Miracle, at last."

Lucian looked at her for a moment in silence, his mouth hard. "You—you talked with Nan Miracle!" he exclaimed.

"Certainly. Why not?"

Lucian uttered a short laugh and continued eating. He did not see the piercing look that Hattie fixed upon him, but Bert saw it and snickered out loud. At that, Lucian laid his knife and fork aside suddenly and shot a vicious look at Hattie's brother. His lips parted, but the words died.

Hattie, ignoring his sudden fury, went on with her story.

"We have been planning to go down and see her for some time. I thought you knew about it. Most of the men in town seem to have known about it all along. Mrs. Blundell led the way in. That woman—I mean the Miracle woman—has a pretty snug place, too. It would have to be, of course. Well, we just put it to her straight that we were working for a clean town and that we're joining with the women of Lost River in making the whole

county better and more decent to live in. We told her that people of her kind were a bad influence on growing girls, especially, and we had to look to the future and protect our children. We were very nice about it all. Each of us—there were eight in all—said a few words—and not one of us spoke a mean word. We just asked her to leave town quietly as soon as she could get ready to go. We even offered to give her any help she needed to get out without any fuss."

"You *did* that?" Lucian's eyes had become black, incredulous points under his brows.

Hattie looked across the table at him in troubled surprise.

"Why, Luce," she said with an injured air, "you talk as though we'd done something wrong!"

Lucian rested his arms on the table and looked at her. Then he lifted one hand and rubbed his forehead. The thing was unbelievable. It was funny. He waved his hand deprecatingly. He was laughing suddenly. He actually shook with laughter.

"Something wrong!" he exclaimed. "Of course not, Hattie! Good Lord, no! It's great—it's rich!"

He began to laugh once more.

"Well—it seems to amuse you," Hattie said frigidly. "Perhaps you won't find it so funny when I tell you the rest of it." She stopped with a snap and cleared her throat. "Nan Miracle—the shameless thing—stood there in the middle of the floor and ordered us out of the house. When we refused to go she dared to tell us that if we didn't leave her house at once she would give us the names of

some of her best friends among the men of Loyola. She said some of us might be glad to hear the names."

Lucian had stopped laughing, but his face was one broad smile still. "What a party that was!" he said. "Now you all have the names of Nan's friends, eh?"

"We would have, but I was the only one who was for staying. And of course I couldn't stay alone. Think of it, Luce, every one of those women backed down and left Nan Miracle's place as quick as they could get out."

"I didn't think they had the sense for that," Lucian observed, but Hattie paid no heed to his remark.

"Think of what this district has come to," she said. "And you—you can laugh. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Lucian's laughter broke out anew. Even Bert, feeling somewhat safe under the circumstances, began to giggle to himself. Hattie whitened and rose stiffly to go to the kitchen. Not until then did Lucian realize that she had really seen anything but humor in the whole affair. It was inconceivable that she—or anyone—should take it so seriously.

In a moment, however, he was in a serious mood himself. Come to think of it, Hattie might easily have had as much reason for concern as any of the other women who had gone with her to talk to Nan Miracle. His eyes narrowed into their sharp, inscrutable look. A sardonic fact, that—that it was not because of Hattie he had had no dealings with Nan Miracle, but because of someone else, someone hopelessly unattainable.

Hattie came back from the kitchen with an air that was

almost triumphantly happy. Her movements were as brisk, as efficient as ever, but her face bore a smile of self-satisfaction that produced in Lucian a feeling of discomfort, of uneasy anticipation. It would be in just such a mood, he could not help thinking, that she would come to him at last, demanding. Intuitively he felt the hour of their certain struggle was not far away.

"After all," she said pleasantly, as she seated herself once more at the table, "I'm glad you can laugh at such things, Luce. It's the man in you, I suppose. I ought to be thankful you *can* laugh at it—and I am!"

All at once Lucian felt tired, physically tired. He finished his supper hastily and made a pretext to get out of the house; a mist was coming down and a horse had strayed beyond the pasture to Blacksnake.

"Well—don't be out late, Luce," Hattie said to him as he went out.

As he climbed up the rugged slope in the waning light, the simple beauty of the world crept about him with a physical warmth. Once, in that Indian summer years and years ago, it seemed, the thought had come to him that there could be nothing confused and wrong in a universe so wrought in loveliness.

He should have come to know himself then, he thought bitterly, as he knew himself now. Was there to be nothing for him but a life-time of regret, vain longing for what might have been? His eyes, searching hungrily down across the slough on the Strand fields, saw something there—a flutter of color. It was Karen, riding straight and slim, her face against the vanishing sunset. Lu-

cian's heart beat with sickening thuds, wrapped about by pain. He closed his eyes from sheer misery as he watched the horse and its rider disappear behind the brush on Strand's land.

On the great, brutal rocks of the quarry flanking the sky above him, the pall of twilight dwelt delicately blue. Lucian made his way through the scrub oaks until he came to a sort of path that led up and across the rocks. The path was little more than a ragged ditch that poured down on the other side of the rocks into a treed hollow through which a fern-hung creek made complaining music. Lucian seated himself on the edge of the hollow. The twilight seemed to have come to rest here, like a sleepy bird. Languid shadows floated, blue, purple, blue, from the woven ceiling of boughs. He sat there until a dense mist came down and wove like wool all about him, and in the white gloom the stunted trees looked like groping things.

He did not know how long he sat in the enveloping fog. When he rose to climb back up the rocks, it was densely dark and the dampness clung to all his limbs.

He had to feel his way until he knew he was back among the farm buildings and set his feet once more in the familiar path that led directly to the house. Dimly, as he approached the house, he saw a light in a window upstairs, where his and Hattie's room was.

At the door to the kitchen, Hattie met him. Even in the darkness her eyes were stamped like great periods of India ink on the white blank of her face. Lucian brushed his hand across his eyes and moved indoors. Without a

word, Hattie went ahead of him upstairs, and in the light that shone down from their room Lucian could see her white cotton night-gown rucking up across her thighs where she held it clutched in her hands.

Bert Murker had a gift of sinister intuition which, coupled with a prurient curiosity, had caused him to lie awake in his bed that night listening for the sound of Lucian's footfall announcing his return. An inherent fear of Hattie and a steadily growing hatred of Lucian had kept him constantly alert to the possibility of a crisis developing within the walls of the stone house. Had those elements been wanting, the promptings of Mert Naley and his companions in Loyola would have served the purpose adequately. The conversation at the supper table had started him thinking. He had not been slow to interpret the mood that had sent Lucian out across the fields as soon as he had finished his supper. He had been vividly aware of some new change in Hattie's temper. When he was sent early to bed, he determined to lie awake until Lucian came in. There might be something—something with which he could satisfy Mert Naley when he next went to town.

He heard the two come up-stairs and enter their room across the hall from his own. There followed a long silence and presently a low murmur of voices. He got quietly from his bed and stole to the door. Lucian's voice came to him clearly as he bent to listen.

"You're not going to start that argument again, are you, Hattie?"

Bert opened the door a mere inch or two and looked across the hall, through the open doorway opposite. Lucian was sitting on the edge of the bed. Hattie stood, white and, it seemed, taller than usual, her back to the long mirror she had had placed in her room when the house was finished. In the mirror Bert could see her long braid of black hair hanging down the white back of her nightgown.

She spoke—and her voice reminded Bert of a hot knife cutting and searing as it cut.

"I've thought it all out—clear—to-night—while you've been gone—*where* I'm not going to ask. I'm not going to be like those other fools—those women I was with to-day. I owe it to myself—to say nothing of you—I owe it to myself to keep you straight, Luce. I wasn't afraid while the baby was alive. Even if you don't care for me you'd live decent for his sake. Women have hinted things to me, but I've laughed at them. I laughed—but I knew there was some reason for their hints. But I'm not going to ask any questions. I don't care what's past. I'm going to be generous about it—I'm willing to be. But I've made up my mind, Luce, and either——"

"For God's sake!" Lucian interrupted. "It's no use, Hattie. It can't be."

Hattie crossed the floor. Suddenly she was on her knees beside Lucian, clasping his legs in her strong arms. He tore at her hands to free himself, but she clung to him with a fierce strength. He stood up suddenly and Hattie fell back awkwardly on the floor. She continued to

sit there, apparently unaware of her grotesque posture, staring at Lucian.

"For God's sake, Hattie, get up!" Lucian said harshly. "You have no idea how you look!"

Almost before he had uttered the words Hattie had sprung to her feet.

"So that's it!" she flung at him. "I don't look right to you. I don't appeal to you any more. But that filthy woman along the railroad appeals to you, doesn't she! Yes! You stay here because there's food and shelter for you here. That's why you came here, you puppy! That's why you came in the first place. All these years I've lived with a man who married me so he could live off me—I who might have married a *man,* took you—you . . . because I was weak and spineless enough to give in to you—let you have your way with me! And now—this—this—from you. You . . ."

She began, then, incoherently, to call him senseless, vile names, and at last, spent with fury, she sank down upon the bed and was almost instantly asleep. Bert watched breathlessly from behind his door, until he saw Lucian blow out the lamp and steal quietly out of the room in the shadows. He waited until he heard Lucian's steps descending the stairway and moving heavily through the living room to the kitchen. A moment later he heard the kitchen door close. The heavy silence that followed was broken by the beat of Lucian's feet as he went down the path that led to the barns. Bert listened until the stillness frightened him. Then he closed his door and stole back to bed.

The next day dawned sluggishly. Lucian left the barn where he had spent the night and returned to the house to eat breakfast alone with Bert. Then, with nerves jagged from the ugly scene of the night before, he went erratically about the farm all day, doing odd jobs here and there that were no particular need of being done. Except at mealtime, he did not go near the house, the atmosphere of which seemed to be surcharged with Hattie's vitriolic mood. Toward evening the light fog that had persisted throughout the day thickened rapidly, shutting the gray stone house out from the rest of the world.

They had an early supper during which Hattie ignored Lucian utterly, directing all her attention with injured gentleness to Bert. Under her solicitude, Bert's silly vanity swelled with pleasure. It had been one of the most exciting days in Bert's life. All day long he had carried about with him a vivid memory of what he had witnessed the night before. All day, too, he had been the object of Hattie's ministerings. She kept him indoors, for the most part, bundling him up warmly in overcoat and scarf when he ventured out into the damp air. And now, at the supper table, to be made something of where he had hitherto been completely ignored! He became talkative and found, to his amazement, that his chatter brought no rebuke. He racked his wits for something to say, something that would catch and hold the attention of the two who sat at the table with him.

"I seen—I seen Mons Torson yesterday—goin' over to Strand's place. Goes over there all the time now. I'm goin' to follow 'im some night."

Hattie spoke softly. "All right, Bert, don't be silly."

"That ain't silly. I told Mert Saturday night. Mert says I ought to watch what Mons Torson does over there. I'm goin' to follow 'im some night."

"Bert!" Hattie rebuked him.

Bert became bold. He giggled grotesquely. "Mons Torson does tricks in the willows," he persisted stubbornly. "I'm goin' to watch 'im."

The color mounted to Hattie's cheeks, but Lucian did not see it. In the very extreme of exasperation he pushed his plate back and got to his feet. He paused for a moment on the verge of a vigorous expletive, thought better of it and strode to the door, snatching his cap from the wall as he went.

The mist had already begun to feel its way with its attenuated, pale fingers over the stone wall, over the tangled growth of brambles and the choke-cherry trees, over the barns and the sheds and the pens. Lucian felt in that groping, ghostly arrival something sinister, threatening. As he went into the barn to bed the horses, he shook himself in an effort to throw off that pall of his imagination.

While he was at work, his mind dwelt agonizingly upon the dark hints that Bert had let fall at the table. Little Karen Strand, then, was to come in for her share of their filthy attention. Was there no escaping the curse of having been born among such people? To what lengths would they go to satisfy the cravings of their base imaginations?

Bert's idiotic, complacent whistle came to him from the

barnyard. The sound was intolerable to Lucian now. A moment later Bert entered the stable and lounged with one elbow on the side of the stall in which Lucian was at work.

"There's nothing for you to do here," Lucian said, striving to control himself.

Bert did not move. He was luxuriating in the thought that he had suddenly, mysteriously, risen to a place of some importance in the world. Hattie's favor had emboldened him. He continued to whistle, looking down at Lucian whose moving form was all but hidden in the semi-darkness.

Lucian glanced up at him. The leer on Bert's face infuriated him. He straightened up suddenly.

"I told you there was nothing here for you to do," he said. "What the hell are you standing there grinning about?"

"I guess I can grin if I like," Bert retorted and slumped more comfortably against the side of the stall. "And I guess I can stay here if I like. I got more right to be here than you have, by a dog-gone sight!"

He began whistling again, his lips pursed and his eyes half closed above his fat cheeks. Before Bert could move to defend himself, Lucian's fingers gripped the thick scarf that covered the fellow's throat. With a quick twist of his hand he tightened the scarf until Bert gasped for breath.

"Look here, you idiot," Lucian said, his voice almost out of control with anger, "I've stood enough from you. After this, you stay out of my way with your damned grinning. What's more, if I ever hear you mention the

name of Karen Strand again—or Mons Torson, either—I'll horse-whip you till you can't stand!"

Bert's limbs crumpled under him and Lucian flung him into the corner of the empty stall beneath the manger.

"Now, get back to the house and stay there!" he told him.

Bert raised himself on one hand and looked up at Lucian. His face was contorted with rage, spite and fear. He blubbered something incoherently, then lay back with his head and shoulders against the base of the manger and began to laugh hideously, a salacious, dreadful laugh that chilled Lucian's blood as he listened to it. Only a monstrous joke could have had such an effect upon the perverted brain of Bert Murker. His face was twisted with malicious humor. A sort of craven courage gave him strength to speak, fleering upward with the half moons of his eyes.

"You think—you think you're so damn much—you do!" he spluttered. "But I got a right to talk about Mons Torson—if I want to. I followed 'im once—an' I know!"

Cold, invisible fingers gripped Lucian's heart. All his anger died suddenly to ashes. A nameless fear seemed to paralyze him. Scarcely conscious of what he was doing, he stepped forward and seized Bert by the shoulder, digging his fingers into the flabby muscles until the man squealed with pain.

"What are you trying to say, you fool! If you know anything—out with it, or by God, I'll——"

"Let me go!"

Lucian jerked him viciously to his feet and thrust him back against the wall.

"Come on, now—out with it!" he demanded.

Bert began to pat his hands together, like a nervous child, his eyes rolling frantically. He whimpered for a moment, shrank from the eyes that were boring into him, then drew himself up with sullen boldness and strove to smile.

"Yeah! She called you a puppy—last night. I heard her. She told you she could 'a' married a man—didn't she? I know. I heard her—last night. Mons Torson—that's who she meant. I know that, too. You think I'm dumb. She thinks so, too. But I ain't so dumb. I watched 'em—her an' Mons—when they didn't know it—yeah! *I* did!" He thrust a grubby finger against his chest. "I guess I got my eyes open—an' my ears, too. I see Torson diggin' them willow roots on his place all the time. I know what for. He had her there one night—when he didn't figger on me lookin'. But he wouldn't marry her. I heard that, too. An' she married you—to get even with him. I know. She told him she did—right there in the old house—one night. Now he goes over to see Carrie. I'm goin' to follow him there, too. There's willows on Strand's place."

He cackled hideously. It was the supreme moment in Bert Murker's life. It had been a great moment when he had rushed in to announce the death of Andy Anderson. But that moment was as nothing compared to this. He

was squaring accounts with the whole world now. He would be somebody of importance after this. He would make Mert Naley laugh now.

Lucian stood, his body stiff from head to foot, his eyes upon Bert, glazed and unseeing. He had expected to hear something about Karen Strand. Instead—what was it Bert had told him? His senses were numbed. Mons Torson—that was it—Mons Torson and Hattie.

He remembered Mons now—as if after years of forgetting. Mons Torson, the friend with whom he had hunted robins in the white fields of winter, when they were boys. Mons had been older than he then—somebody for him to look up to, idolize. . . . Mons Torson, with whom he had walked in the late autumns long ago, in a brown, melancholy world of tumbling leaves. How they had talked, deeply, gravely, timidly, of what life meant—and death, and religion, and love. . . . Love, in a boy's way of thinking. Mons, who had whimsically gone up to Winnipeg, in Manitoba, and had sat in to the classes at the university there, for one whole winter, reading history and poetry, the writings of great men; and had told Lucian that he, too, must get a smattering of education—not too much or it would spoil him, whatever he had meant by that. . . . Mons, who had come down in the spring to Loyola with books of poetry out of which he had read in the summer evenings when they were together. A line or two which he had never lost came back like a familiar pain to the heart. . . . "A boy's will is the wind's will, and the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts. . . ."

Lucian found himself, somehow, out of the barn. The

fog took him. He might lose himself in it now, anywhere; the house was hidden. He might walk away—never look on those gray stone walls again. Mons Torson . . . if he could only summon the strength to get somewhere and think quietly. The fog seemed to have forced its way into his brain, clouded his reason. He wandered about among the buildings, blinded, fumbling.

The fog had come down over the roofs in great tattered shreds, layer upon layer, a tangible thing. The steamy smell of the air blended suffocatingly with the reek of the manure piled against the barn, and with the smell of the sheep in their pen, and of the warm cattle and the hogs. It seemed as though life were smothering here. Presently he heard the distant sound of Bert whistling again, off-key, without control. A light from an open doorway struck a tree above him and it became a ghostly spider's web against the murk. He turned, involuntarily, toward the light. He could not think here, surrounded by this fog. He knew suddenly what he would do. He had thought of it, with misgivings, before.

His feet found the pathway leading to the house.

Mons Torson, moving alone about his homestead, swore at the weather. It seemed to have stripped off all his self-control, denuded him of that stolid immobility that had grown about him in his solitude; it had left his nerves raw and exposed, on fiery edge. As he went about the chores, cleaning the stable, feeding the cattle, watering the horses, he quaked at every sound, looked apprehensively

over his shoulder, cursed at the animals, and was beset with fear of the coming night.

When he had done the milking, he brought the steaming buckets into the house. The black cat, Ben's cat, slunk at his heels, its fur spiny with drops of moisture.

Mons went about making his supper of fried potatoes, fried bacon and eggs. When he sat down to the table, the cat jumped to a chair opposite him and fixed him with its eyes like globes of translucent darkness. Mons stared back at it, but now it seemed to be looking past him.

"Hell!"

He threw a slice of bacon over to the tin mat on which the stove stood. The cat jumped nimbly down to it.

Suddenly Mons got up from a half-finished meal and washed the few dishes in a careless haste that was not his wont. With fumbling excitement he hung the coffee-pot and the frying pan on their hooks behind the stove, swept up the crumbs from the floor, set the two chairs in to the table.

Like a man possessed, he flung himself into his corduroy jacket, laced his high boots tighter below his knees, and pulled his cap down low over his eyes. Then, letting the cat out and fastening the door behind him, he almost ran through his own yard, down the rutted driveway to the main road, and stood before the Murker farm. Soon he would be able to make out a light over there, the place was not so far away.

It was an extraordinary thing he had set out to do. A mad thing, anyone not understanding would think. He laughed to himself, thinking of it as he plunged along

through the fog. But on this prairie madder things had happened than what was happening to-night: one man going through a blind fog to claim another man's wife—one man going to tell another the rotten truth.

He began to breathe hoarsely. It was this damned fog. It got into your lungs, right down into your vitals. It was white and flimsy and firm as a woman—as Hattie Murker, by the lord! But he would get through it. He knew his way well enough for that. He would get to Luce and tell him everything. Everything about Hattie and himself. How it had all been the fault of Mons Torson. How Hattie had sworn to make him, Mons Torson, pay for throwing her aside. And how he *had* paid—God in heaven! First, his brother Ben; then, his friend, Luce. Perhaps Luce would want to kill him when he heard. But that would pass. Luce would be free—he would forgive him, some time. . . . Why could he not keep to the road? He knew his way . . . straight east, and it wasn't far. Only a few steps. There would be a light soon. But the fog was becoming like froth, a palpable thing that you could wipe off your lips, your eyebrows. But he would see a light soon, now . . .

Hattie was washing the separator when Lucian entered the kitchen. But he did not seem to see her. She did not speak to him. He went directly down into the cellar, Hattie, inscrutable-eyed, watching him go.

A few minutes later, he dragged up from the cellar an old mattress, rusted where the springs had dug into it, full of dust. He closed the cellar door behind him and

slapped the dust from his hands. Without a word to Hattie, he took a dust rag from a shelf and began cleaning the mattress.

Hattie's voice came steadily, swiftly, like the descent of a hawk on its prey.

"What are you doing, Luce?"

"I'm taking this mattress up to the attic," he replied mildly. "I've been wanting to sleep there for some time. That cot up there will be comfortable with this on it. I like the sound of the wind up there, under the eaves." It seemed easy to talk, now that he had made up his mind. He was half apologetic, like a small boy defending some whim against the disapproval of an older person. As he glanced at Hattie she laughed outright.

"Wind under the eaves! The idea!" she exclaimed. And then, in a level tone, with utmost finality, such as an older person uses to a child for its own good, she declared, "You'll do nothing of the sort, Luce Dorrit! Do you think for one holy minute I'll have Bert go blabbing around Loyola that you have moved to the attic? I won't! Not after all I've put up with these years trying to live with you. It has cost me too much to have you make a complete fool of me before the whole district *now,* Luce Dorrit!"

Lucian stood up, holding the mattress with one hand, the dust rag hanging limply from the other. The smile on his face was not unfriendly. He bore Hattie no malice now. It seemed that she had just ceased to exist for him —like an intolerable pain, after it has gone. But he had,

now, an overwhelming need of being alone. That need had come to him, like a whisper, out there in the yard—in the fog. Just alone, up there under the rafters where the wind sighed and screamed as it had done when he was a boy, in his father's house, a lifetime ago. . . .

"Put that mattress back where you got it, Luce. If you don't . . ."

He continued smiling at her as he put the dust rag back in its place on the shelf. What did Hattie mean to him now? She meant neither love—nor hate. Nothing did. He seemed to have escaped miraculously from such things, as a sleeper under the brow of a mountain escapes when a landslide crashes down over him, thunderingly, without touching his body.

As for Hattie—the physical concerns of life were still hers, no doubt—children to inherit the farm and to extend its acres—the applause of the little lives that would go on in Loyola—a husband whom she would wear like an armour about her vanity. She seemed a little ridiculous to Lucian now, with her fierce, paltry ambitions and her little fears. Well, she need have no fear now. He would be her defense against Loyola. He would ever be a taunt to the man she really loved, if she must have it so. There need be no more secrets between them. He knew that she had never had an honestly tender emotion toward him. She knew that he had never really loved her. Let them understand each other. And in return it was a very little thing he asked of her. A very little thing. He wanted to be left alone.

In the meantime, he would have to think things out a little before he could tell her all that he knew. He seized the mattress without saying a word.

Before he had lifted the mattress from the floor, however, Hattie was upon him. There was a look in her eyes that he had never seen there before. For a moment he paused. It was a look of alarm, terror, pleading. The memory flashed across Lucian's mind of a time just after their marriage when he had wanted to disorder her hair, her clothing, rumple and abuse her fastidious appearance. He felt almost hysterical as he recalled the day. Where was that old dignity now, that illusion of delicacy, of femininity, that even Hattie had borne? She tugged at his arm, clawed at his shirt, tried to pull his head down upon her shoulder, all the while moaning in a piteous tone.

"Luce, don't do this—don't!" she pleaded. "I'm afraid of myself, Luce! I'm afraid of what I'll do if you don't stop. I'll kill myself, Luce, I will, I will, I will! I won't have you away from me like that. I won't! Put the mattress down, Luce—*put it down!* Leave it—for God's sake, Luce—leave it alone!"

The moment had come, then. He had thought it would be like this. He had always thought of it angrily. He had prepared himself against some sort of violence. He closed his eyes now as there flowed over him a wave of nausea, shame. He thrust her back from him.

"I can't stand it," he said, in a voice from which all the life seemed to have died. "You ought to know I can't."

Instantly she was transfigured. She fell backward against the wall, her arms stiff at her sides, her head thrown back. Words seemed to be drumming in Lucian's ears. . . . "This is a kind of insanity with her . . . she is likely to do anything now. . . . I can't help it. . . ."

"Take that mattress down cellar, Luce!" Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper—out of white, rigid lips.

"I can't, Hattie."

The blood was ringing in his ears.

He stooped and lifted the mattress once more, getting a firmer hold upon it with his numb fingers. All the while he kept his eyes on Hattie's face.

"Lucian Dorrit—put that down!" she screamed, moving not an inch from her place against the wall.

Lucian did not reply. He carried the mattress to the door that led to the stairway. For a moment Hattie seemed to sway uncertainly. Then, on a strangled sob, she uttered his name.

He turned and looked at her.

She had come into the middle of the floor where she stood now, an erect, imposing figure, the light from the lamp shining in little greenish lights on her high cheekbones, her fists clenched at her sides. Lucian could not help smiling. She might have achieved her ends once by this theatrical gesture, but not now. He almost felt sorry for her in the instant, knowing how futile she was, how humiliated she must be. But he was past weighing such things now. Life had humiliated him, too. Hattie's petty vanity did not touch him.

She was talking, now, in her low, intense voice, each word so charged with feeling that it threatened to break, violently, shatteringly, as she uttered it.

"I'll give you one more chance, Luce," she was saying. "If you don't put that mattress down—I'll open that door and it will be the last you'll ever see of me alive. As God hears me, I mean it!"

As though from a long way off Luce heard his own voice. The words took shape mechanically, it seemed without his own motivation.

"I—can't—Hattie!"

He lifted the mattress, then halted. Hattie was running to the door now. The door was thrown open. A cloud of steaming mist burst into the light of the lamp. The smell of it was nauseating, thick, rank. . . . Then suddenly, Hattie was gone. The white curtain of the fog had dropped behind her.

Lucian let the mattress slip from his hands to the floor. For a long time, then, he stood, unmoving, his eyes upon the open doorway through which the fog was drifting . . . drifting . . .

Back to his shack Mons Torson stumbled like a drunken man. The light at the Murker place had appeared before him, out of that wreathing, hideous stuff, like the sudden flare of a lighted match. But he had been unable to go on. He had been unable to face Luce Dorrit with that story—the story about himself and Hattie Murker, Luce's wife.

PART FOUR

THE LAMP IN LOYOLA

CHAPTER XI

"It's remarkable—most remarkable, the way these people manage, from time to time, a tragedy or a near-tragedy to break the even tenor of their ways," said Mr. Tingley, in a tone of half-humorous superiority, by which he considered that he distinguished himself, subtly and inoffensively, from "these people."

Doctor Muller, thinking his own thoughts in the leather depths of the really comfortable chair into which Tingley always urged him when he came here for an evening's visit, heard his host with that small part of his ear with which he deemed it necessary to listen to him. He was going over in his own mind the events of three nights ago, when his office telephone had jangled him out of the pleasant indifference to life that had taken possession of him after a number of bracers and a dozen unsuccessful games of solitaire.

The school principal's observation roused him momentarily from his reverie.

"Um-m-m—not so remarkable, Tingley," he disagreed. "It's a pretty old habit—this business of breaking life's monotony. I believe Adam and Eve started it—although you might argue that in their case it was neither tragedy nor near-tragedy."

Tingley's laugh was meant to be lightly sophisticated, but he could not help the feeling that facetious references

to Holy Writ were scarcely in good form. On the other hand, he always made allowances for Muller. The old doctor's quips frequently bore the shadow of vulgarity.

Muller, however, lapsed once again into his musings, was wholly unaware of the delicate play of his host's sensibilities. He had slipped back to three nights ago and was seated in his own dingy office with the sound of his telephone rousing him from his pleasant stupor. Lucian Dorrit's voice was on the wire, curt, harsh, summoning him to that stone house his wife had built. Something had happened there. He was on his way again to the Murker farm, through a fog that was like the pall of death. Lucian, like a man in a trance, was opening the door for him, his face gray—the gray of steel, emotionless. On a chair near the stove sat Bert Murker, shivering like a beaten dog.

And then, Lucian was speaking.

"I carried Hattie in from the pit in the quarry an hour ago. She's upstairs—on the bed. I think she's dying."

Later, when Muller came down again to the kitchen where Lucian was sitting like a man of stone— "If she lives, Luce, she'll be bedridden for the rest of her life."

He had had to tell Lucian Dorrit that. But not a muscle of Lucian's face had moved. Muller had sat down beside him then and had waited. Asked no questions, just waited. Presently, in a few terse sentences, the story came out. No doubt of its being the truth. It was too grim to be anything else.

". . . And then—I went out—to look for her. No—first I carried the mattress up—and put it on the cot. It

seemed the important thing then—the only thing that mattered. You see—I thought I had to win out, Muller. And I won out—you understand! I won out! Then I went to look for her. Just human to do that, eh? Somehow I knew where to look." He paused, running his hand across his forehead. "I thought at first, Muller, that she was dead, you understand."

"Dead?" Bert Murker's voice, high, shrill, had startled Muller, but Lucian seemed not to have heard it. He sat with his eyes upon Muller's face.

And then Muller had got to his feet and paced. "It would have been—better," he had said gruffly.

Seated now in the deep comfort of Tingley's big chair, Muller recalled vividly how he had left the house then and had gone out into a gray dawn, windy, clear, cold, stinging with the first hint of winter. Lucian had walked with him to the gate, the zinc-gray squalor of the early light revealing his face pitilessly. Muller, distraught from the events of the night, had kept his eyes studiously away from those of the younger man. He would have wept at the look of him. He had talked briefly of the doctor he would call in from Lost River to assist him—and of having Mrs. Blundell come out at once to take charge of things until a trained nurse could be got—and of how it would, perhaps, be wisest not to have Agatha Dorrit come, although she would undoubtedly wish to.

And at the end of all his cheerful talk, Lucian had raised his face and said vacantly, "Thanks, Muller," and had added, when Muller shook hands with him, "I know you'll do all you can. But I want you to understand one

thing—I don't want any of your pity, Muller. I don't want it—because I don't need it. Perhaps I'll be in hell for the rest of my life, but I'll be there free. And that's what I wanted, wasn't it?"

Well . . . Tingley was urging Muller to accept a cigar.

"You wouldn't call that—that Adam and Eve—story—a comedy, exactly, would you, Muller?"

"Eh? What—why not? Why not?" He bit off the end of his cigar.

Tingley smiled, a trifle loftily. "I suppose it's all in the point of view, Muller," he observed. "It's a bit original, that's all."

Muller applied a match to the end of his cigar. It was in moments such as this that he thought, affectionately, of his shabby cards reposing in the upper drawer of his desk. Why the devil should anyone waste his time trying to talk to a man who could be so inexpressibly dull? He changed the subject abruptly.

"Do you think this cold snap is going to last right through till we have the winter down on us, Tingley?" he asked.

"The signs seem to point that way," Tingley remarked with a smile. "Mons Torson left for the woods yesterday."

Muller looked up, surprised. "I didn't know that," he said.

"I don't think anyone knew it till he was gone. He's away a full month earlier than usual."

Muller was silent for some time. He was wondering just what had moved Torson to leave so suddenly, the

day after the misfortune had befallen Lucian Dorrit's wife. Could there be any possible connection there? Torson was a strange man—the whole human race was strange, for that matter. Tingley's voice brought him to himself again.

"You know, Muller, there's something about that man, Mons Torson, that rouses one's curiosity. I've been wondering about him myself for a while back. And I'm not the only man in Loyola who has been wondering."

"What do you mean by that, Tingley?"

The principal glanced once through the doorway leading to the other room where his wife was sitting, then lowered his voice.

"Well, there have been stories going the rounds, Muller —especially during the last two or three weeks."

"Stories? What stories?"

Tingley seemed at a loss for a moment as he strove to bring together the stray bits of gossip that had come his way since the news of Hattie's mishap had reached Loyola three days before. Muller himself, through the Blundells, had been responsible for the form in which the news had come to them. Lucian Dorrit's wife, it seemed, had gone to Blacksnake in search of her black mare that had wandered that way earlier in the day. The fog had come down suddenly and she had lost her footing and fallen into the pit where she had been found later by Lucian who had gone out to hunt for her. The circumstances were simple enough, believable enough, acceptable, too, when the tragic incident of young Andy Anderson was recalled.

"The fact is, Muller, that story about Hattie going out in the fog to look for the mare isn't as convincing as it seemed to be at first."

Muller was losing patience, but he controlled his voice and manner with little effort.

"True stories aren't always as convincing as they might be, Tingley," he said. "But I don't see what's wrong with this one."

"Well, in the first place, there doesn't seem to be any good reason why a woman should go looking for a strayed mare when there are two men about the house to do it for her."

"Hmph! Anything else?"

"Well—yes—there is, Muller. It seems that Luce and Hattie haven't been getting along as well as it was thought. I don't know how that got out, but it's being talked about in town. And they are saying that Torson figures in the case, too. As man to man, Muller, do you think there could be anything to it?"

Muller was silent while he puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. He thought of a facetious use of the Adam and Eve story by way of reply, but discarded it immediately. He thought of asking Tingley just where the gossip had originated. He checked the impulse to satisfy his curiosity. When he spoke, finally, it was to express himself in the form that his host would most easily understand.

"Tingley," he said, "as man to man—your friends are a lot of damned gossiping liars."

"I'm glad to hear that, Muller," Tingley replied. "Won't you have a fresh cigar?"

Early the next afternoon, Karen Strand entered Muller's office as he was on the point of leaving to make his daily call at the Murker place. The girl's face was white as chalk. For a moment Muller feared that some calamity had overtaken her.

"Well, my chicken, what's happened to you?" he inquired with an effort at cheerfulness.

"Doctor Muller," she said swiftly, "are you going up to the Dorrits'?"

He nodded.

"You must take me with you. That's why I've come. I want to go up and—and help take care of Hattie. I can at least look after the house. I've talked it all over with Kjaere. I've got to go!"

There was a note of resoluteness in the girl's voice, a precise finality that he had never detected there before. He played for time.

"Now—just a minute, Carrie. Sit down here till I get straight on this. When did you turn nurse—and when did you make up your mind that you had to nurse Hattie Murker?"

He peered at her sharply as he spoke.

"It has taken me three days to make up my mind—isn't that long enough? Are you going to take me out with you or must I walk?"

"You don't look fit to be playing nurse," he told her abruptly.

"Never you mind how I look," she retorted. "I'm all right or I wouldn't be here."

"What makes you think you'll be welcome—up there—if I *do* take you along?"

"If I'm not—I want to find that out. I won't stay if I'm not wanted. I came to you because I want you to make the offer to her. I want you to tell her I'm ready to come."

"And if she says she'll have you—how long do you intend to stay?"

"As long as she needs me."

"Do you know——"

"I know how serious it is. I know what I'm doing, too. Take me with you."

In the end, Karen accompanied Muller on his visit. For the past three days, Mrs. Blundell had been doing her "poor best" for the sick woman and her two men folk. Hattie had opposed the suggestion that a competent nurse should be brought down from Lost River to look after her. She insisted that she would be all right in a few days. All she needed was a little rest—and a little friendly attention. She would have no strangers about the place. Muller had given in to her for the present. She would learn soon enough, if she did not know already, just how serious her condition was.

On the way out from town, Muller was very silent, as was his wont on lonely journeys along the prairie roads. He seemed to be totally unaware of the girl sitting beside him. In reality, however, he was keenly conscious of his companion that morning. He was thinking of the Blun-

dell woman. She would have enough to talk about for the next months as a result of her few days with Hattie. What wouldn't she have to say when "that Strand girl" came to look after things? Mrs. Blundell would be very reluctant to return to the duties of her own household now, Muller observed to himself. Darn these women, anyhow, always so "willing to help" when people were in trouble! Why in thunder couldn't young Karen have kept herself out of this? There was going to be enough talk anyhow. He shot a sidelong glance at her, sitting straight and determined with eyes too vivid in that blanched face. What was her object? Was she going to become a sacrifice, too? Hadn't Hattie Murker ruined lives enough without this? He suddenly became impatient with himself. What a sentimental old fool he was! Why should he be interested in people's motives? What was it all to him, anyhow? Come on—Sodom—Gomorrah!

Lucian came up from the barn as they drove into the yard. With a nervousness for which he inwardly cursed himself, Muller got down from his buggy and began to pull off his gloves. He didn't want to see these two meet —Lucian and Karen. He could have run away and left them to themselves. But Lucian was beside him now and Muller, looking up obliquely, saw him turn a blank face to the girl sitting in the buggy.

"I've brought Carrie along, Luce," he explained. "She wants to lend a hand with Hattie—until—well, until we find it necessary to get a nurse."

As he spoke, he experienced a feeling of his old irrita-

tion at the utter meaningless of words and at his own utter unimportance in using them.

Lucian nodded half-heedingly, scarcely glancing at Karen. Muller did not fail to notice the blood burning in the girl's cheeks. He stumbled on in confusion.

"Mrs. Blundell won't be able to stay long, you know. And Carrie is willing to give us all her time. She can run across the fields there once in a while and take a peek in to see that old Peter is all right. Eh, Luce?"

Lucian nodded again, absent-mindedly. Muller took him by the arm and led the way to the house. Glancing back at Karen where she remained seated in the buggy, he saw that her head was high and rigid on her slim throat, her face averted.

One of the images that Muller was always to hold in memory, stark and pure as a sculptor's dream of the unhewn marble, was the face of Hattie Dorrit as he announced to her Karen's wish. A strange gleam appeared for an instant in the cold, stony eyes and then, with lips that barely moved, she whispered,

"Karen is a good girl. Send her in. I can trust her. Tell her."

It was more than Muller had expected, far more. He turned away and left the room. When he came back, a few minutes later, with Karen, he paced softly up and down the hall while the girl went in to Hattie.

Karen flushed crimson at the look the woman gave her.

"Karen!" Hattie said feelingly. "It was nice of you to come—like this. You're going to stay?"

"Yes, Hattie."

Hattie smiled, her eyes upon Karen's face.

"You're a sweet, pure girl, Karen," she whispered jerkily. "I—I can trust you. I know I can. I won't have a strange woman in the house. I want to know what's going on while I'm here. I want someone I can trust."

After only a few halting words of sympathy to Hattie, Karen turned away and went downstairs while Muller completed his visit. Mrs. Blundell was busying herself with the mid-day meal, but Karen gave her no thought. Her meeting with Hattie lay like a weight upon her heart. There had been something so forlorn and yet so tenaciously willful, so dominating and yet so sordidly cognizant of the fundamental change that had taken place within that gray stone house, something so repellent, too, in that hint of mistrust coming from one who had but a day or two before been within the very bosom of death, that Karen had come away from her presence actually ill.

With a feeling that she was committing herself to an indefinite term of voluntary imprisonment, she moved to the window and looked out at the clear sky and the naked fields and the brown weeds shivering under the cold wind. From the kitchen came the thin, colorless voice of Bert Murker doing his best to improvise a melody to fit his perversely jubilant mood.

Karen Strand had been at the beck and call of Hattie for three days before Lucian Dorrit seemed to take any notice of her presence in the house.

During those three days, Lucian had gone about the

house like a man walking in his sleep. He had scarcely eaten. With the coming of darkness he had gone out into the fields and had walked about by himself until long after everyone in the house had gone to sleep. He spoke to no one, saw no one, heeded no one's questions. Karen, proud and aloof at first, found herself at the end of that third day frankly disturbed over his conduct and his appearance.

She had striven to keep herself from speculating on the particulars of Hattie's accident. Her first fear—that she herself might have been in some way involved in a quarrel that had led to the disaster—had been quickly dissipated by the welcome Hattie had given her. She had even begun to believe that Hattie's misfortune had come upon her accidentally, as rumor had it. And yet, the look on Lucian's face made her guess at terrible, unspeakable things.

Once or twice, oppressed by the odious mystery of it all, she had been almost driven to asking Muller outright to tell her the whole truth about the affair. Only the conviction that he would tell her nothing for her pains kept her silent. She reminded herself many times a day that she had come here for Hattie's sake, and for Hattie's alone. Hattie was her whole concern. She set her mind sternly against brooding over Lucian. She could not forget, at times, the dark, lawless feeling she had had for him, but she would tear that out of her heart now. The ordeal of being in the house with him and caring for the woman who was now helplessly dependent upon them both would, she told herself wretchedly, bring forgetfulness.

But whenever she caught a glimpse of his haggard face her heart ached for him in spite of herself. It was only her manifold duties that kept her from feeling utterly crushed by the pall that hung over the stone house.

Karen had tried, too, to keep from unrolling before her mind the black years of despair which were to be Lucian's. She had tried to tell herself that perhaps Muller and the doctor he had brought from Lost River were wrong —that Hattie would not have to lie, like so much dead wood, flat on her back for the rest of her life. The thought overwhelmed Karen. It could not be that Lucian Dorrit, the Lucian she had known as an odd, smiling, whistling boy, long-legged and shy, should be united forever with a woman whom he did not love, with a mere body in which life had paused like a mocking ghost on the threshold of death.

On the evening of that third day, she had made supper for Bert and Lucian and had sat in to the table with them. Lucian had drunk a cup of tea and had gone out again at once, leaving his food untouched.

Hours later, when Karen came down from Hattie's room, Lucian came into the kitchen. He stood stock-still in the middle of the floor, as though beholding her there, in his wife's house, for the first time.

Except for Hattie, they were alone in the house, Bert having gone to Loyola to escape the enforced quiet of the place.

Lucian's eyes narrowed as he looked at Karen.

"You're here, eh?"

His words were a harsh sneer, uttered from twisted lips.

Karen's heart seemed to stop a beat and then began to throb. Never, in all her life, had she seen so black a look on any human face. Lucian had thrown his hat carelessly into a corner of the kitchen and his dark, wavy hair was uncouth over his brows. She stared at him, fascinated.

"Yes, Lucian—I'm here," she echoed. It seemed to her that her words issued from a void. She sat down wearily upon a chair near the table, her eyes still upon Lucian.

He came slowly across the floor and stood looking down at her, his arms hanging at his sides, a threatening scowl on his face.

"Don't you know better than to come here?" he shot out. "A little innocent like you! Don't you know this house is cursed? You'd better get back home!"

Karen lifted her face with a courageous smile.

"Lucian—what's the matter? What has happened to you? Can't you tell me, please? You have changed—so terribly, Luce. Is there something you can't tell me?"

She was pleading with him, but he laughed suddenly, a harsh, ugly laugh.

"Didn't I tell you this house is cursed?" he replied. "Isn't that enough for you? What else do you want to know?"

She became bold suddenly.

"I want to know what has happened, Luce, to change you so," she told him.

He stooped above her, but she did not move.

"So you want to know that, do you?" he demanded grimly. "Well, damn you, I'll tell you. I'll tell you.

You've heard them tell what happened here, eh? Well, it's all lies, damned lies. I—I drove her out to the quarry that night. I crippled her for the rest of her life. Now you've got it straight. And *now*—maybe you'll get back home, where you belong—and stay there!"

He was swaying, as he spoke, like a drunken man. Karen flung the back of her hand against her mouth to keep from crying out. For many seconds they remained staring at each other, horror and pain in one face, in the other a sardonic, senseless brutality. And then, suddenly, without a word, Lucian Dorrit swung about and made his erratic, unseeing way out of the house.

"I never saw the like," Mrs. Blundell declared triumphantly over a cup of tea at Mrs. Tingley's. "You'd swear Carrie Strand was Hattie's own daughter, or sister, or something, the way that girl waits on her. And it just seems that Hattie can't say enough for her, she's that nice about it all. But Luce! Him and Carrie don't speak. One don't even let on they know the other is there. It got kind o' late and I stayed for supper. Hattie and Luce have been at my place often enough, says I to myself, why shouldn't I stay and see what's really going on here, anyhow? And with a young girl like that in a house with a crippled woman and two men, I thought it wasn't more'n my duty to see that everything was—well, you know. And all through the meal they never even looked at each other."

Mrs. Blundell slapped the palm of her hand smartly down on the table as she spoke.

"Do you think it—it might have been just put on?" Mrs. Tingley ventured, half frightened at her own daring. Her eyelids, naturally pinkish, actually seemed to share in the demure blush which suffused her face at her own suggestion of impropriety.

"No, sir!"

There might have been a faint hint of disappointment in Mrs. Blundell's denial. Mrs. Tingley murmured, approvingly.

"I'm quite sure of it," Mrs. Blundell went on emphatically. "You could just feel the hate between them two. Whenever Luce opened his mouth to say something to me—and that wasn't often, he's got that grumpy and sour—Carrie would just freeze tight and look as though she didn't hear. And then when she'd talk to me, he'd clear his throat and twist his mouth on one side and make a lot of noise with his knife and fork. I never seen anything like it. And that Bert—he just kept lookin' from one to the other of 'em, sort o' scared like, and grinnin'. I tell you—it made me feel funny, the whole business. Hattie is the only one in that house that seems happy and natural. Luce looks like the devil's after him, and thin as a rail, and old—it's a pity, how he looks! And that Strand girl—she's just all gone to eyes, and there's something so stiff and quiet about her—you know the way a person looks at a wake?"

Mrs. Blundell had reported more or less precisely the actual state of affairs in the Murker house. Imprisoned in that inescapable intimacy which only a winter-bound house can create, the four souls who dwelt within those

stone walls on the Murker hill led an extraordinary life. Sometimes it occurred to Karen, going about her endless duties there with a numb heart, that they had possibly all died and that this was some fantastic bourne of the hereafter where souls are united in a sham propinquity more horrible than any earth-loneliness. Occasionally, she escaped to spend a few hours with her father, tidying the house for him, baking bread and cakes, and laughing at his protests when she told him of her work at the Murker place. She would return at nightfall then, her courage restored, to care for the invalid in the stone house and to bear with the irascibility of Lucian and the vagaries of Bert.

Outwardly, at least, Hattie's growing devotion to Karen seemed genuine enough. There were times, however, when Karen was puzzled. As Hattie recovered from the immediate effects of her misfortune she began, with a resoluteness that was at once appalling and pathetic, to ignore the fact of her paralysis, and to assume her former self-sufficiency. She contrived artfully to make her own helplessness a new basis for her control of the affairs on the farm. It became a weapon in her hands, by which she effectively reduced all opposition. She ruled despotically, from the minutest detail in the running of the house to the most important business transaction in the managing of the farm. Every day, for a few minutes, Lucian talked with her in her room, as a hireling might talk with his employer, reporting precisely what had occurred on the land that was hers, and among the livestock that was

hers. He gave her an accounting, to the dollar, of how he handled the money that was hers. He was courteous, even gentle with her, in a lost sort of way, and in return she smiled faintly, fully aware of her authority.

In one respect, however, she assumed no self-sufficiency. She must have the company of Karen Strand. Her manner of confiding this need to Karen was subtle. She spoke always as though she did not require any attention to her physical needs. But she was ever grateful for Karen's presence in the house and at her bedside. It sustained her spiritually. It satisfied her yearning for an affection that was otherwise denied her, her manner insinuated, always a little pathetically. One watching her might easily infer that she felt she was doing the girl a favor in preferring her company to that of others who might have served her.

On evenings when Lucian was in Loyola and Bert already in bed, Karen read to her for an hour or two in that white-plastered room ghostly with shadows from a blue shaded lamp. Hattie was wont to protest mildly, always solicitous of Karen's health.

"There now, Carrie, you've read enough. Just sit quiet a while."

"I'm not tired, Hattie."

Hattie's smile was motherly. "We don't know when we are over-doing ourselves, Carrie. We have to pay for our foolishness, don't we? Look at me. I was that headstrong, I had to go up on Blacksnake and look for that horse. But I was never one that could stand the thought of a beast being hurt. I'm that soft."

Loyola and the district had finally accepted that explanation of her accident. Hattie, moreover, was apparently anxious to shield Lucian. Her gentle solicitude there was a constant puzzle to Karen. The girl was too young, too ingenuous, to grasp at once Hattie's design.

One evening, however, when Karen had laid her book aside, Hattie, with a faint gesture of her hand, said a thing which left Karen stunned.

"I wonder where Luce is to-night," she murmured pensively.

"He and Bert went to Loyola together," Karen told her.

"I know—I know," Hattie replied. "I s'pose he is paying one of his visits to Nan Miracle to-night."

In her voice there was no malice whatever. She might have been making an observation about the lamp on the table.

Karen choked suddenly, and then flushed with fear that Hattie had noticed the catch in her breath. But Hattie's eyes were dreamingly on the wall beyond the foot of her bed.

"Oh, no—not that, Hattie," Karen breathed, striving to keep the ridiculous panic out of her voice. Her thoughts seemed to be spinning uncontrollably.

Hattie smiled, patronizingly. "You're young, Carrie, and innocent," she sighed. "You have a lot to learn about men—and a lot that I hope you will never have to learn. It's their way. They can't help it. We hope for better things—for a while even I hoped for better things from—from my Luce. God gives us strength to bear such things, Carrie. Weak as I am I have somehow been

given strength now to bear anything, to forgive anything. After all, Luce doesn't try to deceive me. I have that to be thankful for. It makes it easier, somehow, to forgive. God sends us trials to make—ah—h——"

She closed her eyes with a sharp drawing together of her brows, and her hand fluttered to the counterpane over her heart. Karen, always frightened at these sudden pains which attacked Hattie, hurried for the medicine bottles on the table. Restored by the drug, Hattie touched Karen's hand and said, her voice strangely tense:

"Promise me you'll stay with me, Carrie. Promise not to go home."

Karen suddenly had a curious feeling of fright. It was as though the lock of the door had suddenly clicked, trapping her in this room. But then, looking at Hattie, she reproached herself.

Almost before she had formed the words in her mind, she said, "I'll stay—until spring, Hattie. Father may need me, then."

A few minutes later Hattie was breathing quietly, and Karen heard her murmur the "goodnight" which meant her dismissal. She blew out the light, and on her way from the room paused for a moment and looked out of the window toward Loyola. Under the cold night stars she could see the glow of a lamp down near the railroad track, separate from the other lights of the town. Karen felt suddenly sick.

People about Loyola remarked upon the fact that it was a winter very much like the one following Lucian

Dorrit's and Hattie Murker's marriage. The siege of the cold persisted week on end, reducing all endeavor to the dingy human business of keeping warm. The telephone wires became the arteries through which life flowed from one farm to the next. The drifting snow restored the roads to their original owner, the prairie, and, in its disapproval, even buried the fence-posts that had come, impertinent intruders between field and highway. Christmas, New Year's, came like wanly festive spirits into a frozen world, and were gone again.

Muller came frequently to visit his patient in the stone house. When the winter set in vengefully, however, making the roads almost impassable, and when Hattie with her vigorous will was beginning to show caustic resentment at Muller's visits, insisting that she was a healthier woman than he had ever been a man, the old doctor cheerfully reduced the frequency of his calls.

Early in January Hattie had a serious heart attack which necessitated Karen's telephoning for Muller. Karen, Lucian and Bert remained in the kitchen until Muller came down from Hattie's room. Karen was nervously stirring the contents of a sauce pan on the stove; Lucian sat enveloped in his usual dark moroseness; it was Bert, curiously enough, who was alertly anxious, his half-moon eyes watching intently until the doctor appeared in the doorway at the foot of the stairs.

Muller drew up a chair and talked in a low tone to Lucian. Bert scuttled up like some grotesque, eager animal, and stood, stooping forward with his hands on his knees, listening to what Muller had to say.

"I've expected something like this, Luce," the doctor said. "I've been waiting for it. We've got to be careful now. Any severe shock would be a very serious thing. Her heart wouldn't stand it, that's all. She's got to have absolute quiet."

It was Bert who spoke first, in a queer, reedy voice.

"Do—d'ye mean she might die on us? I th-thought you said she was goin' to live, Doc. You said——"

Muller turned a dry look upon the quivering Bert.

"There's no reason why she shouldn't, with the proper care," he said, and rose to take his leave.

"She'll get it, Muller," Luce said shortly.

Karen stared at Muller as he made his way to the door, and the doctor, seeing her eyes, felt himself suddenly age by years.

Even Lucian, in his self-absorption, observed that for the rest of the day, Bert bore the harassed look of one acutely conscious of impending disaster. So haunted by his fears was he that he even forgot that evening to go and stand before the organ in the parlor, as had been his wont, gazing longingly at the keys which, on Hattie's account, he had all winter been forbidden to touch.

During the following week Bert applied himself assiduously to pleasing Hattie, running with large, cat-like quiet up and down the stairs all day long, devising delicate means for his sister's increased comfort that amazed Karen. Hattie, supremely at her ease in her consciousness of complete power, enjoyed this tribute to her own importance even while she knew Bert too well to believe that his devotion was unselfish. Bert, in his mon-

strously slow, circumambient way, had a motive for everything he did.

On an afternoon when Karen was at home with Peter Strand, and Lucian was at work outside, Hattie became aware of what that motive was. Her unfortunate brother, seated at her bedside, broke down and wept with genuine terror at the prospect of being left, in the event of her death, to the mercies of a man who hated him. He had never doubted Lucian's hatred for him. Hattie, faintly amused, faintly contemptuous, as she was of all human frailty in which she did not share, touched, too, by her brother's evident distress, smiled at him reassuringly and told him to fetch Blundell on the morrow. Bert Murker should become a land-owner in his own right.

If Bert had hitherto been difficult for Luce and Karen to bear with, he now became insufferable. The half section of land which Hattie deeded over to him puffed his vanity to bursting. Karen and Lucian, who had remained as frigidly unaware of each other as if they had been utter strangers, now found, however reluctantly, a common irritation in Bert. He effected magnanimous gestures, made bold promises to buy "somethin' purty" for Karen when he next went to Lost River, and even included Lucian in his smug overtures. Involuntarily, at such times, the girl's eyes sought Lucian's and would meet there, before she drew her own glance away, an expression of sympathetic, half-amused annoyance. Both, however, guardedly preserved their resentment toward the fact that they had been brought thus unwillingly together in their disgust for Hattie's brother.

Bert, emboldened now to ask for it, secured Hattie's permission to play the organ in the evenings. Night after night, his idiotic fingering of the keys drove Lucian out into the cold fields or down into Loyola, almost in a frenzy.

"Peter—Peter—Pumpkin-eater——"

Bert never wearied of the tune, once he had discovered, to his delight, the keys which made it.

Karen sought the inadequate refuge of the kitchen. Hattie always smiled whenever she spoke of Bert's diversion. She even took pains to assure Lucian on occasion that it was her wish that Bert should play the organ if it gave him pleasure. Poor Bert—he had so few pleasures in life! Bert, however, had suddenly awakened to the fact that there were pleasures in life which might yet be his, if he but used a little wit. Other men had seized them—and they had not had a half section of land to their credit. Why should not he?

He began timidly at first, but with increasing boldness to force his attentions upon Karen. When the situation became almost intolerable, so unwholesome it was, Karen would have protested to Lucian had she not feared that he would tell her bluntly to go home where she belonged, and leave the cursed house to them that must live in it.

Lucian, for his part, sunk in the depths of his own bitterness, was wholly unaware of what was going on in Bert's mind. If ever he became conscious of Karen, it was to wish in heaven's name that the girl would go home, and stay there.

The intense cold did not prevent Lucian from taking

long walks across country at night over the open stretches of hard snow. Out on the white waste of rolling drifts, it seemed possible to disentangle oneself from life's complexities. Since Bert's abominable gibbering at the organ had begun, the white hard prairie night had become a solace. His brain rested there, as though suddenly enclosed in an impenetrable crystal, safe from the flaying reality of facts. Out there he found a calm growing within himself. He was thankful that his mind and soul were untrammeled now by the dingy trappings of remorse. He, Lucian Dorrit, had attained to manhood, even if he must pay for the attainment with a life of hell. He was winning a kind of content, would have won it complete, indeed, if it were not for the presence of Karen Strand in the house. Her cool detachment, her veiled contempt, infuriated him. The little fool! What right had she to judge him? What did she know of him from the scant bit of the truth that he had given her? The disloyal, stupid little fool! Could she not see the ugly meaning that lay behind Hattie's professed affection for her? Did she not know that Hattie was simply having her way again, as she had always had it? Or was Karen acting now from sheer spite toward him? The stupid little fool!

Returning home later than usual one night, he saw that the lamp in the kitchen was still lighted, although the rest of the house was in darkness. He opened the door and halted before a scene that stopped the breath in his throat. Karen had retreated into the corner between the stove and the wall. Bert was advancing toward her, his

flabby hands outstretched in a horrible attitude half of diffidence, half threat. In two strides Luce was beside him. He gripped his arm, and flung him back toward the table. Bert swung about, grasping the table to keep himself from falling, spluttering incoherent rage and fear.

"Shut up!" Lucian snapped. "Get up-stairs to bed!"

Bert, whimpering to himself, turned away and shuffled toward the stairs. Lucian, his pulses beating like hot lead in his veins, watched him until he had vanished. Then he turned to Karen.

For a long time he stood, looking at her intently, in silence. She had averted her face so that her head was pressed against the wall. A tear had trickled out of the corner of her eye and had made a silvery path down the hot red of her cheek.

"Now—you damned little idiot!" Lucian said angrily. "Perhaps you'll go home and stay there!"

She turned her face toward him and they looked at each other for one desperate second of revelation. In that brief instant the savage resentment that each had borne the other for long months seemed suddenly to fall away. They stood, defenseless, frightened, unhappy before each other, as they had stood on Blacksnake in that tender evening light of summer.

"Luce—Luce—I can't go," she told him. "I'm not afraid of Bert."

Lucian lifted his hand in a gesture of impatience.

"God in Heaven, will you never understand!" he muttered. "Don't you know what's happening here—to all of us? Can't you see? I've heard her talking to you.

Do I have to tell you everything before you'll understand?"

"You've told me nothing," she said quietly. "And I'm not asking you anything."

He leaned toward her, a rush of impatience sweeping him. Then he drew back and regarded her as if she had been a child. He began to plead with her, his voice shaken with feeling.

"Don't talk like that to me, Spingle. Don't! I know I haven't told you anything. I've been out of my mind for weeks. Besides, I thought you'd see for yourself—and understand. I know what sent you here. I've known it from the first. You thought you owed her something. You thought *you* sent her out into the fog that night. And *I* tried to tell you. *I did it—I—* We fought —here in this room. But it was not because of you. Something else, Spingle—something I can never tell you —something I can never tell anyone. But I did it. I brought all this on myself. You must believe me now, Spingle. You must! I've got to go on living—through it—to the end. Don't you see? I've got to. But I can't go on with you here. I can't live and see you being drawn into all this mess—the mess I've made of things. I can't live and see her drag you down with the rest of us. You have other things to do—another life to live. Don't you remember, Spingle—all we talked about? All I wanted to do—all I wanted you to do? Don't you understand? God in Heaven, do you want to throw your life away, too? Don't, Spingle, don't! You must go away—now—before it's too late! It doesn't matter

about us here—any more—but you, Spingle—for God's sake!"

Karen had listened, resentful at first and stubbornly drawing her defenses about her. But that mood passed quickly. For some time, from the very first, indeed, she had not been altogether convinced of Hattie's sincerity in her protestations of affection. She had been puzzled to account for the woman's hypocrisy, if hypocrisy it was. In her heart, she felt that Lucian was telling her the truth now, that Hattie was putting the curse of her own perverse will on still another life. But why?

Lucian's pleading had brought the tears to her eyes. When he had finished speaking she replied in a voice that was broken with sobs.

"Oh—Luce—I can't—I can't go—not yet. I've promised to stay—till spring." She shook her head impatiently, then lifted her eyes and looked at him. "But why—why should she want to draw me into it all?"

Lucian stared at her. He knew how obstinate she could be. She had evinced it in harmless ways even in her childhood. Would he have to bludgeon her with the brutal truth before she would understand?

"Because she hates you, you fool!" he blustered angrily. "And because she knows I—" He paused, looked at her searchingly, then closed his eyes slowly and turned away. Half way across the floor he wheeled upon her suddenly. Karen saw him tremble violently as he strove to speak. Then, without uttering a word, he turned from her and went heavily up the stairway to his room.

For a long time, then, Karen stood against the wall,

her eyes toward the doorway through which Lucian had vanished. Deep down within her a new understanding was born as she stood there in the soft light with the silence of the winter night enfolding her. The pain of it was like a sudden thrust of steel. O groping, stumbling, human kind! And O Life—moving, inscrutable, despotic Life that throws its mantle about our eyes and casts its impenetrable shadow along our path!

From without came the sudden sharp report of the stone house settling to the frost.

CHAPTER XII

On a sullen night in early March Lucian Dorrit, coming out of the barn where he had bedded the livestock, saw a light straight westward where the night before there had been nothing but prairie darkness. Lucian paused, a strange stillness creeping up over his body. Mons Torson, then, had come home.

Lucian finished his chores in a leisurely fashion which had come to characterize all his actions. Striving of any kind had long since begun to seem to him a little absurd. He even took the time and the pains to go to the summer kitchen where the cream cans stood and, first scraping the almost obliterated name, "H. Murker," off the cans, proceeded to paint on each, in bold, red letters, "L. Dorrit." He smiled a little, whimsically, as he thought that there was something abnormally symbolical in what he was doing.

But all through his slow activity that evening he was conscious of the tide of insane passion he was holding in check. And he knew that the moment his work was finished he would be powerless to restrain that passion any longer. He knew that he would go to Mons Torson tonight, and that the weeks, months, years of his pent-up bitterness toward the man would find release in violent, blundering, animal fury.

Lucian did not go in to his supper that evening. He

felt no desire to eat, but above all he wished to avoid any questioning on the part of Hattie, who had been moved downstairs into the dining room. From her straight bed beside the window she could better keep in touch with all that went on inside the house and out. But to-night Lucian did not wish to go near the house. When he heard Karen's call summoning him to supper, he did not reply. Instead he took his way down to the gate of the stone fence, his body bending against the cold.

As he moved through the darkness it occurred to him that no matter how far removed from the stone house his physical being might become, his mind and soul would still remain prisoners within it. The fancy came to him that perhaps his soul had died there on the night of his great spiritual conflict with Hattie—died on that sordid field the death for honor. Mons Torson's face, with its odd, broadly set, gold-yellow eyes, shy and yet challenging, like an animal's, seemed to dance in the darkness before him. He felt a little light-headed. He should, perhaps, have eaten. But what did that matter? What mattered the manifold secret hungers of the body, the comprehensible or the obscure, the lust for bread—or the lust for the light of a star as yet undimmed by its own birth.

He was walking up Torson's rutted driveway now. He was peering through the grey-white darkness, but without a sign of Mons anywhere among the farm buildings. He would be indoors, then.

Without haste Lucian went to the shack and paused a moment before the doorway. Finally, without knock-

ing, he pushed open the door. Mons, pipe in hand, rose from the table as Lucian stepped over the threshold.

For a moment Torson's face swam before Lucian's eyes, as meaningless as a smoke-ring. Then suddenly his whole frame stood limned in devastating clarity. Lucian smiled, a quiet, raw smile of exultation. He knew now what it was that he wanted, had wanted for a century, it seemed, of dire hatred. Carefully, as though marking out a path for himself on treacherous ground, he stepped forward until he could have touched Mons Torson with his hand.

In his place beside the table, Mons stood with an expressionless face, his pipe held in his hand where it had suddenly paused half way to his mouth. From beneath the peak of his cap a red gleam shot out of Lucian's eyes, a gleam of climactic fury. Torson saw it and his hand curled more tightly about the bowl of his pipe, but he did not move.

Lucian parted his lips. The roof of his mouth was dry, and for a moment he feared that the words that burned on his tongue would not come. Then suddenly he spat out an oath so soft, and yet so distinct and violent that it seemed to snap against all the four walls of the room.

"Torson—damn you to hell!"

On the last word Lucian's fist shot out and there was the sickening plash of flesh on flesh as it struck Torson fairly on the mouth. The man's head jerked backward violently but the great bulk of his body did not move. His head rolled forward heavily as a stunned bull's. His attitude was curiously inert. Again the younger man's

fist gathered into a cudgel of steel, but now, for the first time, Lucian was aware of the look in Torson's face. His hand dropped limply at his side. Behind that stolid mask before him shone a suffering of soul that turned his fury-tensed muscles to pulp. He felt suddenly ill from head to foot.

Torson had stepped back to the table to steady himself. His swelling lips parted and his voice came, haltingly.

"All right—all right—go on, I'll take it! Do you think you can hurt me now? I knew you'd find out. But I've come back—d'you get that? *I've come back.* I'm going to settle—I'm going to pay up . . . I'm going to pay up, I tell you. . . ."

His voice had risen for Luce had turned away and stumbled drunkenly to the door. Without heeding Mons Torson he went out of the house, leaving the door open behind him. The light from Torson's lamp caught the flakes of snow that were fluttering softly down against the outer darkness.

Lucian moved eastward, but as he set foot on the Murker land he changed his course, presently reaching the creek that led south toward Loyola. He could not go home now. He might as well go down to the town, he thought dimly. Had he glanced back he might have seen that Mons Torson had followed him from his shack, followed him through the darkness and the falling snow until he had veered toward the creek.

Lucian followed the course of the stream down through the Dorrit farm. The cold air snatched at his breath and

rimmed with white the muffler at his chin. Last year he would have gone up the path to his mother's house and sat a while before the fire. It did not occur to him to do so now. Why should he go and sit like a ghost in his mother's house? His true self had become invisible to his kin. His language had become the language of despair. The truth of him would be neither seen nor heard in the house where dwelt his fortunate, careless, dreamless brothers and his happy little sister Leona, betrothed now to a sturdy neighbor boy and already secure in her promise of substantial wifehood.

The lamp in the Dorrit house was behind him now and Loyola lay before, a dim scattering of lights in the flat distance. Lucian shivered. They were unutterably cold, those lights. Tiny and drear, that little prairie town, with its scant handful of bleak little lives. He had gone to school there, it seemed, and they had given him books out of which he had learned what it was he had wanted to be and where it was he had wanted to go. But then they had taken the books away, before he had memorized the text, and the prairie had opened itself to his eyes, a volume of dark knowledge.

If Mons had only struck back, instead of standing there and looking like that! If the man had only had the character to have it out with him, once and for all! Luce had wanted that physical satisfaction of smashing Mons, but even that had been denied him. You couldn't smash a ghost. Even there Torson, his old friend, had failed him. He wouldn't fight. What was there left now?

There, down westward, where the railroad track would

be, a light glimmered apart from the rest, with a separate, dull, reddish warmth. It was like a living heart hung there, low in the gray night, free and alone, distinct from the pale lifeless company of those others. The lamp in Nan Miracle's house. They said it bore a red shade.

Perhaps Karen Strand was looking out of the window now, in Hattie's house, wondering where he had gone. Perhaps—but it wasn't likely. Not that it mattered one way or other. Lucian laughed harshly. In all probability Karen would at this moment be attending to the more delicate needs of Hattie.

A dark impulse moved within him. He had felt it before but there had always been something—something that checked it in spite of himself. Had Mons Torson fought him he might have checked that impulse now. As it was, however, what did it matter? He would go down to Nan Miracle. A sort of veil clouded his eyes for a moment as he thought of it. He had heard men tell of the woman's place there by the railroad track. There would be one or two others there, playing cards, perhaps. And among them some vague sort of decency, who could tell?

It came to him suddenly then that he did not want to go. He had never really wanted to go. He had no wish to go anywhere now. Vice was a feeble thing, as was virtue. All one. Slowly he turned and began retracing his steps homeward along the stream. He was scarcely aware of any feeling of cold. There was a tenderness, a caress in the feathery, white, blurred downfall of snow. It seemed to enclose him preciously from that outside

prairie, gray and cruel and heartless, the bitter void that was life. The large, frothy clusters of the snow clung delicately to his cheeks, brushed like a cool, dear love his lips and eyelashes. It was a blessed falling white silence. Up past his mother's house he walked—between the rows of willows on the banks, where solitude dwelt and a small wind nickered, an elfin spectator, droll, unhuman, cruel.

Lucian had no idea how far he had gone. A memory came and walked beside him now like a soft footfall, like a wistful ghost out of the troubled hours of youth. It was the memory of the night when he had skated home from his mother's place, and had leaned back against the bank of the stream, and had thought how easy it would be to fall asleep and let the snow cover him. The atmosphere seemed to weave about him like a slow, heavy dream. When he reached the curve in the creek's course from which he could see the lights in the stone house, a nameless weariness drew him down into the cozy elbow of the bank. He told himself that it was weariness. He would rest only a moment or two before continuing his way home. There would be no danger of his falling asleep. It occurred to him then that Mons Torson had looked as though he had not known sleep for a year. God in heaven, what a look! And he—Luce Dorrit—had struck him. He had struck a man who looked as though a knife had run him through. He had wanted Mons to know that he had learned the truth about him and Hattie. Had he been any kind of a man he would have spared Torson his knowledge. He would have kept up the pretense of contentment, even with life a cursed stretch

of desolation before him. Who was he to blame Mons Torson for what he had done? Or to blame Hattie, for that matter? Life had picked them all for its laughing stocks. Let the cruel joke stand.

Mons Torson had meant to overtake Lucian, to walk beside him and talk—if he had been able to find the words. But when he had seen Lucian, vaguely ahead of him in the darkness, turn toward the creek and Loyola, he had let him go. Then he had made his way alone up that slope to the stone house. After all, it would be easier now to do what he had come back to do.

There had been years during which Mons Torson knew what he would some day have to do for Lucian Dorrit. Once he had tried—and failed. But the hour was now uncompromisingly at hand. Lucian knew the truth about him.

Mons laughed to himself as he strode up the Murker hill, laughed at the grim humor of it all. He had loved Hattie in his way, as much as he would ever love any woman. He supposed he still loved her, in his way. But he had been square with her. He had told her that he was not a marrying man. That he would break a horse, but that he would not take the trouble to break a woman. He had used those very words. Before anything had happened between them. But it was not enough for her. And she had never forgiven him. She had been too damned ambitious, that was what was wrong. She had wanted Mons Torson. She had wanted to make one great farm of the Torson and the Murker land. But he had

been deaf to her—stone deaf. And she had sworn—on that last night when he had seen her in her own house—that he should live to repent of what he had done.

Well, she had had her way. She was right. He *had* lived to repent it. He was here now to atone, to admit that her will was the stronger. What a joke! What a cursed funny joke!

Somewhere down the Murker barns he heard an erratic whistling. That would be Bert. He was glad Bert was not in the house. Not that it mattered now. Nothing mattered. He walked boldly up the path from the stone gateway and around the house. Here he was at last before the door. It was a strange thing he had come to do. But he had come.

There was a light in the kitchen. He pushed the door open abruptly and walked in. He stood uncertainly for a moment in the middle of the floor, half expecting Hattie to appear before him as she had done on that last night when he had called. How vigorous she had been, how full-bloomed, how fiercely confident, how challenging to something primitive still in a man made lazy, indifferent by civilization. Instead of Hattie, however, it was Karen Strand who came out of that inner room, closing the door behind her, and stood looking at him with startled eyes. Young Karen, who did not know.

"You, Mons!" Karen said softly as she approached him.

A shock of warmth came into her cheeks as he stood glowering down at her. Why had Mons Torson come?

"Luce is not at home," she ventured.

Torson smiled wanly. "I know that," he told her.

"He's gone down the creek there. I've come to see *her*. Where is she?"

His voice, that could be very mellow in its appeal, was rough, unpleasant. There was something in his bearing that startled her. She put her hand impulsively on his sleeve.

"No one must see her," she told him. "Doctor Muller——"

He brushed her aside. "*I'll* see her," he said doggedly. "She wants to see me. Where is she?"

Karen, her eyes wide and dark in a suddenly colorless face, was unable to speak. Mechanically she nodded toward the closed door of the dining room, and Mons started across the floor at once. Overwhelmed, Karen stood watching him with stricken eyes. What terrible things had Mons Torson come to do? Luce—where had he gone? Why was he not here? She recalled then what Mons had told her. Down the creek—she would have to go for him.

Mons Torson's shoulders blocked the doorway of the dining room which was dimly lighted by the blue shaded lamp which stood beside Hattie's bed. The bed looked curiously rigid as though it were, under the covers, a slab of stone. The lamp-light lay like a frail gauze over the bed and over the white, still hands of the woman upon it.

Lucian Dorrit's wife lifted her eyes slowly, as though with some premonition, toward the doorway. Her gaze met Mons Torson's. It was a look that lasted for many

seconds, each of which encompassed years of violent, bridled emotion. It was a furious embrace, that look. At length Mons moved into the room and with a step or two reached the chair beside Hattie's bed.

The woman's face was drained of color. In that blanched, still mask, her eyes were black, terrible. But the man who sat beside her smiled quietly. He leaned forward slightly, his hat in his hands.

"I've come to tell you that you've won, Hattie," he said. "You've got to me at last over the bodies of two men—one not yet buried."

She opened and closed her mouth several times before she spoke. At last the words came, cold from between stiff lips.

"Mons Torson—I hate you—I hate you!"

The lines of Torson's face were set, sober. "No Hattie, you love me," he said softly. "You have always loved me. The hell of it is, I've always loved you."

There was a sharp, sibilant sound as Hattie drew in her breath. A flush crept up and lay almost like a rosy reflection in the hollow of her cheeks. Mons, regarding her, was filled with an extraordinary emotion. It was an emotion that he had fought against for years. He could fight no more. He was a lost man.

"It had to be either you or me, Hattie," he resumed, his voice harsh now. "I knew you'd break the man you'd marry—unless he broke you. I was too lazy, too damn' selfish to try it. I knew that. But you've done it. I'm broken. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

He paused for a moment or two. Hattie's breathing seemed to have stopped. Her hands lay rigid upon the white spread.

"For years, Hattie, I've been running away from you —from Ben—from Luce—from myself. I've been haunted, night and day. But I've come back to face it —to face myself. I've come back to face you—to tell you that we have committed an abomination in the sight of God."

His voice sank almost to a whisper as he leaned toward her and lifted the clenched hand that lay on the coverlet. And folding it within his own hands, with grave tenderness he muttered, "Now—I've come to you."

The long wooden clock on the wall, with its ornate carvings, ticked out the silence. There was no sound in Hattie's weeping. Her tears flowed down from the corners of her eyes and across her temples, tracing the faint blue veins and losing themselves in her dark hair. She tried to lift one hand to her face, but its strength was gone. Her power had fallen from her like a useless mantle. She lay spent, inert, defenseless.

With his own handkerchief Mons Torson wipe her cheeks and eyes. Then, bending close to her he drew her head against his shoulder. A sigh seemed to run through her whole body. Her breath caught suddenly—like a deep shuddering sob. Her fingers crumpled up convulsively into her palms, and then as suddenly relaxed: Mons Torson's eyes brooded down upon her pityingly, apprehensively.

Lucian Dorrit, sitting in the shelter of the bank, warm and snug in the white darkness, was reluctant to wake. Someone was shaking him.

"Luce—Luce!"

It was Karen's voice. She seemed to be crying. Foolish Karen.

She had her arms about him now. Her head was bare. She was kneeling beside him, trying to lift him, his head pressed against her breast. She must be a part of his dream. He had often dreamed of her so, even against his will. In the white, dappling glimmer of the snow he could see her face, her wide-spread eyes tilted with their odd look of courage and fright. He put out his arms, closed them about her, hungrily.

Her face was wet with crying. But now, Lucian, returning to reality, thinking resolutely, bitterly, that Karen should leave Loyola and the blighting shadow of his own life at once—to-morrow—scarcely heard her. The sense of her words was lost to him until at last she spoke a name that brought him to full consciousness with a shock.

"Luce—Luce! Something terrible has happened, Luce. Come quickly. It's Mons—Mons—Torson. He has come back, Luce. He is with Hattie. I'm afraid, Luce —I'm afraid!"

Luce stood up and stared at Karen, remembering. Mons Torson—Hattie? And Muller—he had said a shock would . . .

He started up the creek toward the light in the stone house, Karen following him. They exchanged not a

word on the way, but each knew that the mind of the other was numb with the consciousness of a colossal possibility.

Spring in Loyola. Rendezvous of rains and winds and suns, vagabonds from some uncharted region of summer . . .

Doctor Muller sat hunched down in Mr. Tingley's leather chair. Tingley had been talking in that irritating manner of his that always left Muller at a loss to understand why he had not stayed in his office with his beloved cards. He had been talking of Mons Torson, of Lucian Dorrit, of Hattie, and Karen Strand.

And Muller—Muller had been thinking of the last time he had seen Karen and Luce together. It had been on a soft grey morning a week or so ago, when the doctor had accompanied Karen to the Murker farm to say goodbye to Lucian Dorrit. It had been a simple thing, that farewell, a quiet clasp of hands, a grave searching-out of one pair of eyes into the other. But Muller had had to look away, his heart quickening happily.

"So Carrie got away to the city at last, eh?" Tingley said. "I think we can really expect something big from that girl some day. There's good stuff there. Nobody round here expected her to stick by Hattie the way she did right up to the last. You know, Muller, there was something funny about that whole affair. Mons Torson's being there the night Hattie died, and everything. And they say Luce Dorrit has turned over the whole Murker

farm to Bert. Do you think it's true, Muller, that he's going down to the city, too?"

"Why not?"

Tingley had no reply to that. But his curiosity was far from sated. Muller, however, had no intention of sating that curiosity. He was reflecting now upon the Luce Dorrit who had come into his office that very afternoon, carrying with him his first letter from Karen Strand. At the sight of his face, the doctor knew that some strange alchemy unknown to Muller's profession had effected a change within him. He had become again the boy that Muller had known back beyond a shadowy yesterday.

"Look here, Muller," Tingley said. "As man to man, was it heart-failure that killed Hattie Murker?"

"No," Muller said briefly, "not heart failure. As man to man, Tingley, since you ask it, I should say she died of —frustration."

Tingley puffed silently on his cigar. He experienced a short-lived dubiousness concerning Muller's remark. He decided at last that it was a clever reply. He stalked importantly across the room. Inwardly he glowed with pleasure in the conviction that to himself only, of all the people of Loyola, would Muller have said such a thing.

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